

Love

MAIJO OTARO

Love Love

for

love

you!





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"**LOVE** IS A PRAYER. I PRAY. I WISH FOR THE PEOPLE I **LOVE** TO ALL BE HAPPY. I WISH FOR ALL OF THEM TO FULFILL THEIR WISHES. I WISH FOR EVERYONE TO LIVE SOMEWHERE WARM, COOL, OR WHATEVER THEY FIND COMFORTABLE, AND BE SURROUNDED BY THEIR **LOVED** ONES. I WANT ABSOLUTE BLISS TO POUR ON THEM LIKE HEAVY RAIN. I **LOVE** EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN THE WORLD."

A SET OF LOVE STORIES DIGGING INTO THE ESSENCE OF LOVE AND STORIES.



LOVE LOVE
LOVE YOU!
I LOVE YOU.

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MAIJO OTARO

TRANSLATED BY HIKIKEN (SWAY TRANSLATIONS)

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Prologue

Love is a prayer. I pray. I wish for the people I love to all be happy. I wish for all of them to fulfill their wishes. I wish for everyone to live somewhere warm, cool, or whatever they find comfortable, and be surrounded by their loved ones. I want absolute bliss to pour on them like heavy rain. I love every single person in the world. Those whose names I know, those whose names I don't know, those I will get to know, those I will never get to know; I love all of them. Because, if things go well, we could become very close; that possibility alone is enough of a reason for me to love everyone. Naturally, I don't care about the differences between everyone else and me. It's obvious every person will be different. I don't even mind everyone's flaws, blunders, or errors. We might meet through some coincidence and, maybe, become friends, or perhaps something even more important to each other; that being a possibility is what makes me love every other human. If I get to meet them, I can love each and every human individually. We simply don't know each other by chance, but if we ever get to meet and things go well, then maybe we can love each other even more strongly. That is why I pray for everyone. My prayers themselves are love.

Prayers and wishes and hopes are ways of expressing through words how you want things to be—or, in other words, your wishes for the future—meaning they are diametrically opposite to regrets, remorse, or the like in the direction being faced; despite that, I choose to pray towards the past too. I express my wishes of how I want something to be even for things that have already happened. I don't let hope go.

Prayers are made out of words. Words are what make everything. Words are undoubtedly gods, and provoke miracles. The prayers, wishes, and hopes I have for the past, for things that are already fully over, through words, open up new possibilities. When praying towards the past, words become stories.

People write stories for many different reasons. Various things happen, and these make people pray for all sorts of things. And sometimes, these

prayers take the form of a novel. These prayers can provoke miracles and spark hope for the past. They might even make those wishes a reality. At least inside stories and novels.

Chieko

A doctor calls me. I get invited to sit on the chair by the desk despite not even being part of Chieko's family. The round stool mat turns out cushier than expected; it produces an airy sound as it envelops my butt. I let out a sigh. The doctor starts speaking before I can fully empty my lungs: *Tiny bugs have entered Chieko's left lung and started living inside where they are slowly eating away at the walls, reproducing, and growing in number; they'll soon be too numerous and eat more than the lung can naturally regenerate; some of the bugs have also been observed to start moving out of the lung.* Bugs? Huh, that's the kind of disease you're dealing with nowadays? The doctor shows me a specimen of that bug species. The insect in that plastic vial has actual limbs and joints. I was expecting a thready creature like roundworms and pinworms, but it's actually closer to weevils. Pests that attack rice and have a characteristic elephant-like trunk. But the name of the insect I'm looking at is asma. It's not a weevil. It invades people's bodies and feeds on their organs. Human metabolism can regenerate fast enough to sustain a few asmas and cancel their impact. But a large number of them shatters that equilibrium and results in the body's downfall. Like with Chieko. *This summer's abnormal heat might have played a role in it,* the doctor says. *Asmas have been growing in number all around the world. They've killed 27 people in India just this fall.* Can we take them out via surgery? I ask. *If we can catch them, yeah,* the doctor says. *These little guys have legs. They're quick. They swim around the body. And they can enter pretty much anywhere. It's both a game of tag and hide-and-seek with them. A previous patient's parent asma would hide behind the big toe's nail; it wasn't found after ten surgeries so it was just a repeat of kids growing in numbers, an operation, kids growing in numbers, an operation, kids growing in numbers, an operation, until the patient's body finally broke. Listen, I need you to cooperate so I'll be blunt,* the doctor says, looking me in the eyes. He takes the asma specimen away from me. *If we can't find and remove all the parent and child asmas in the coming two months, Ms. Yagi's life will be in danger.* I ask him: How

many asmas are there in Chieko's body currently? *That we've observed, 49.* Do you know which one is the parent? *It's likely the one we've confirmed to be located beneath her left armpit last night. The parent in Ms. Yagi is a fast-moving type so we'll have to lure him towards the legs with drugs during the operation, the doctor says. There's no escape route down there, it's relatively far away from the heart, and it doesn't have many arteries so we can even cut them off as a last resort. We will need to operate on her at least seven times. I fear we'll have to fight using dire tactics,* the doctor says. Fight? I find that term surprising, but listening to his explanation, that's definitely the right word. This isn't exactly a treatment. *Ms. Yagi's body is a stronghold in which highly-consolidated troops, asmas, have shut themselves inside. If we catch a soldier asma during an operation, it will scream and alert nearby soldiers who'll then produce a warning cry and relay that information all over the body, putting all the scattered asmas into a state of alert and stimulating them—put simply, they fill their bellies to prepare for the battle: escaping deeper into the body, as dictated by their cowardly nature, and devouring organs. That's the one thing we don't want to happen. We have two ways to go about the surgeries: when we know for sure there aren't any bugs nearby, we can prevent that initial scream by silently removing the whole chunk of flesh around the target from Ms. Yagi's body; when there are other bugs nearby, we can insert special, asma-scream-proof metal plates into the skin around the targets—we can take out a whole squad at once with this strategy, but it makes the asmas panic and greatly damage the organs present around them. Either way, both option one and option two are bound to damage the patient's body. Also, we can't use them wherever we want on the body—*

Despite some reticence, anxiety, and of course fear, the surgeries start taking place. A war begins within Chieko's tiny and fragile body. The team takes out seven soldiers from the left upper-arm and wrist on the first surgery. *Seven down already,* Regas the surgeon rejoices along with a whistle next to Chieko. I get worried for an instant that might wake her up and look over in her direction, but no such thing happens. She's been drugged asleep for the surgery. The patient has to be put to sleep for these operations or they won't

hold. Past the surgery gown's sleeve, I can see the edges of the metal plates that have been planted into Chieko's left shoulder to cut off the asmas' screams. They've left them in so they don't need to dig into the skin again in case another bug enters the left arm after the operation. However, I hope that doesn't happen. The seven asmas have already made a giant mess of Chieko's muscles and blood vessels while running away from Regas' scalpel in sheer panic. Regas also tended to the arm while he was pursuing the asmas, but emergency measures can only take you so far; it will take a long time for the tissues to heal, and an even longer period of rehabilitation for the limb to retrieve its past glory. And yet, he's considering getting bugs to enter Chieko's left arm one more time. If possible, two more times even. No, three times. I'm kidding—many, many more times. I personally wanted him to fuck off, but he argued, *I mean, this area is already a mess, it's preferable to ruining an intact spot*. Really? Regas is a surgeon, he's used to cutting people up. He's used to many things. To me, he seems to think that even if Chieko's left arm gets damaged beyond repair, at worst they can just cut it off. That she has a whole two arms and two legs, so losing one is a small price to pay compared to losing her life. I don't think that's wrong, at least when phrased that way. However, comparing losses and possibilities to life doesn't delete the subject's value. Chieko's left arm is important. To her, and to me. I've held her left hand countless times. If she loses it and ends up with only her right arm, which hand should I hold when that one is already carrying her bag?

I'm so stupid. Chieko might be losing an arm in this and yet I'm only thinking about the hand I wanna hold. I can't be like this. I should be striving to empathize with her fears, suffering, and struggles more sincerely than I am now. But what makes *me* sad is becoming unable to hold Chieko's hand.

I'm a lost cause. I'm focusing on my own sadness instead of Chieko's feelings, getting depressed because of it, and choosing to clear my shitty mood by getting in a fight with some delinquents who taunted me on my way to the hospital even though I could've walked by and ignored them. I've never even fought anyone before this. A guy's fist crashes straight into my nose and

snaps it. The pain doesn't stop at my nose. The shock courses through my brain, reaches the other side of my head, and splits the whole thing open. A wild *tskwaaan* resounds in my head. I start crying. I can barely breathe. I'm seconds away from collapsing onto the ground like a loser. I'm considering going with that and getting these three middle or high school punks (though I doubt these dumb-looking asses are going to school in the first place) to inject pain—*real* pain—into me through unhinged punches and kicks. I'm not in enough pain to stand by Chieko's side. Tiny bugs are devouring her from the inside. Doctors are cutting her open with scalpels, plucking bits of her flesh away, passing strings through her, and sewing her together. She has bronze-colored plates planted inside her arm. I keep thinking about Chieko. Even while fighting. But I'm not really putting up a fight, am I? One of the guys pulls out a sledgehammer hidden in one of the park's thickets; that's when I realize that my stupid yearning for 'real pain' fueled by excessive emotivity is just gonna end up getting me killed by these morons. I've only seen fistfights in TV shows and movies so I was kinda aiming to get a cool 1-vs-3 win, but I shouldn't be caring about that crap in an actual fight. I stand up, grapple with the guy, push him down, and deliver a desperate flurry of punches—the sort I've never seen in any movies—onto the down-jacket-wearing guy with the sledgehammer. I keep punching him for a good ten seconds without breathing once. I pick up a stone lying on the ground and break a standing guy's two cheekbones. I jump onto the other standing guy who's trying to pick up the hammer and yet again bang his head with the rock. It doesn't take much for the skull to cave in. *Fuck, I'm actually killing him*, I think. Even this reminds me of Chieko. I can't be losing time murdering people here. The last guy yells *Motherfucker I'll kill you* or something at me but I ignore that and run off. *Hey, don't fucking run away*, he adds and start chasing me, so I turn around and use that momentum to throw the stone I was holding at him. It lands right on his face. I jump him. There are many stones lying around. I pick up one and get ready to make his stupid face sandwiched between afro hair and a sweatshirt even more of a mess when he suddenly breaks into tears

and apologizes: “Please don’t kill me. I’m so sorry,” so I stop. I lose my will to fight and get shocked at my own actions. *These guys also have parents and siblings and friends who would get just as sad at their deaths as I would if I lost Chieko*—I think to myself, at least through words. Part of me is of the mind that nobody around them actually gives the slightest shit whether these morons are alive or not, but what got actually turned into words was the logic that someone dying results in the people around them being sad. I apologize to the afro-sweatshirt dude and call an ambulance with my phone. But when it arrives he refuses to get in. He also says the other two don’t need to board it either. But they’re all gravely injured—especially the bald guy I attacked second who’s on the brink of death—so I help the paramedics move them aboard and restrain them onto stretchers. We go to a different hospital than the one Chieko is at, they get treated and make it out alive, and I get interrogated by the police but not arrested or even prosecuted. Those three were using that park as their stronghold, attacking anyone passing by and stealing their money. Someone even got hit by that sledgehammer in the back and is now paralyzed in the right half of their body. A police officer tells me I was lucky. If they hadn’t been high on drugs, I wouldn’t have stood a chance against three thugs used to mugging people. And as they investigate more, my *good-citizen* feat becomes even more impressive. An officer combing through the park discovers their hideout beneath the abandoned public toilet and rescues a girl sleeping in the empty waste pit on top of a few bedsheets. There are traces of people living there. That girl seems to have been sleeping over in that dark, concrete-made, filthy cellar along with the other three. Her identity is unknown... *Kids these days eat in the toilet or just gather there with friends despite not being homeless at all, they see it as their second bedroom even, not sure why*, the officer checking over my record says. *You gotta do more than lay out sheets and sleep there to surprise me now. Man, that girl must reek*—as he keeps rambling about and reading through my report, another piece of news comes in: The girl found under the toilet who was being transported to a hos-

pital for a health checkup attacked the paramedics and police officer and escaped from the ambulance. Currently on the run. *Huh?* I and the three officers in the room with me react aloud. What the hell, so she's working with them? She wasn't trapped down there? We then get another detail: The two paramedics each got their eyes stabbed with fingers and are injured. The officer got some of his neck bitten off and is in a severe state. The ambulance's driver is fine. A bizarre piece of info rolls into Chofu's roused-up police station—from the park, this time. Officers have brought flashlights into the thug group's underground den beneath the toilet and found out that the cubic space isn't just a box made of bare concrete. The ceiling was smeared with dirt, and flowers like tulips, roses, lilies, margarets, hibiscus, and more are growing downward from it; the floor was painted blue and has some clouds drawn on it. As though the world was upside-down. It's unknown how flowers managed to grow and bloom in that darkness, and how exactly the garden was stuck to the ceiling. I get released amidst the chaos. I get pestered by the media as soon as I step out of the station. I don't speak a word to them and board the taxi an officer has called for me. I hesitate over whether to head straight to Chieko's hospital, but I don't see any cars following me so I get the taxi to drive me there. Chieko is waiting for me. I arrive at the hospital. The staff looks at me differently than usual. *Probably because my nose is bent and swollen from getting hit*, I start thinking to myself, but a nurse quickly tells me, *We saw you on the TV, that must have been rough*. I think, *Oh right*. I am Mister A., Chofu's model university student. *You must be really strong in fights*, the nurse tells me but in my eyes there hasn't been any actual fighting. I just got hit one-sidedly, then got scared of death and almost killed my opponents. Fights are meant to be a healthy, manly way to decide for sure who is the stronger one. I enter the room Chieko is staying in. She's on the bed, angry. Because I'm later than usual. *What were you doing?* She asks. Uh, a lot happened, I reply. *Like what?* Nothing too important. *Something not important made you arrive four hours late?* Sorry. *Listen Takuya, I might die, you know? Honestly, I will probably die. I mean, just today, a doctor came in while you*

weren't here and said they've found another parent asma in me. What? What do you mean? There are two factions inside of me. Is that a real thing? They said it was rare, maybe the first case of it. So the asmas are waging war inside of me, you know, trying to win the other faction's territory, so the parents' reproduction rate is three to four times higher than normal, which means more kids, and when these kids come across an enemy inside my body they scream and make all the asmas who hear it panic and eat more of me, so my body's apparently a hot mess. So what's your excuse? Why did they only find out now? The second one only entered me recently. Huh? While you were staying here? Apparently. That's fucking hospital-acquired infection, it's a crime. Yeah, at this point I'm not sure if I'm here to heal or be killed. Seriously? Can we sue them? Don't. My mom and dad were also angry but I told them not to do it. I mean, I'll keep getting treated here and I don't want to make this into a huge deal. Let's get you in another hospital. Forget that; why were you not with me when I was going through that, Takuya? Please, why did you waste four whole hours? That's a super long time, you realize? Did something more important than me dying soon happen? I want to be with you as much as possible until my very last moments, but maybe you don't, Takuya? I also do, I say. I do, I'm sorry I'm late, I also want to be with you Chieko, I want to spend as much time as possible with you, there's nothing more important than you to me, I'm really sorry I wasn't here for you, I wanted to be by your side— Oh, hold on Takuya, look, there, Chieko interrupts me, twists her white, left arm so the elbow's articulation faces upward, and moves it over so I can see it. Look, here. A bulge is moving under the skin part Chieko is pointing at with her right index, about halfway between the elbows's inside and the base of the palm of the hand. That's an asma. A living one. That tiny bulge the size of a rice grain moves about five centimeters across Chieko's arm right underneath the surface in three seconds, then disappears. It plunged deeper inside Chieko's arm. This is so irritating, Chieko says. It happens every now and then. Don't you find them cocky? Are they taunting me or something? I absolutely hate it. I bet I can remove them with a pen tip or a cutter, but then they'll scream and the other asmas will react... It's almost like they

know that and keep provoking me. I hate these guys. It's so frustrating I can't do anything when they're this close—as I listen to Chieko, I suddenly come to the realization that Chieko isn't ill. Her body isn't malfunctioning, she's only hospitalized because there are bugs inside her. I'm looking at Chieko, but not just at the girl known as Chieko—I'm also looking at the nest for the tiny bugs known as asma and at these insects' large foodstock. There are bugs inside Chieko; I can vividly feel the many lives overlapping as one in my eyes. She's on the brink, I think to myself. Between the singular, visible lifeform—Chieko—and the numerous, hidden lifeforms—the asmas—the latter almost looks stronger to me. Like the asmas aren't the one living inside Chieko, but she's the one enveloping them. Chieko's life seems to be slowly, blurrily, randomly flickering to me. The asmas aren't just eating Chieko's body but also her life itself. Unadulterated anger towards asma rouses up inside me. Up to this point I've sympathized with Chieko's condition, found it painful to look at her suffering, shuddered at the operations she's undergone, worried for her, and felt for her in all sorts of ways, but only now do I feel a strong urge to kill asmas one way or another and get rid of all those pests ruining Chieko's body. And the removal operations I've been asking to take slowly because they put a lot of stress on Chieko's body, now, I want them to be held as soon as possible, with the shortest interval required in-between.

I can't keep dousing Chieko's body with lukewarm pity. She will die if I keep being this gentle with her.

I grab Chieko's hands and beg: Chieko, please get that surgery done. I know it will be painful, but please find it in you to do it anyway, I tell her. I usually try to cheer her up before surgery. But up to this point my encouragement has been more along the lines of *I hope the surgery goes well and you get your health in shape*. But I meant this one as *I want you to actively pursue hurting and losing your body, accept that you'll lose a substantial part of yourself, and resign to it*. I wanted her to be ready to lose any number of arms she could afford; to be ready to undergo extreme pain and live on with a tattered body. Chieko has never said anything like that nor shown any signs that would indicate she

thinks that way, but I don't want her to accept her imminent death and prioritize keeping her body intact. I don't want her to opt for death over losing a few limbs. Chieko's white, slender, long arms shake my hands off. *Stop it*, she tells me. *Takuya, do you realize how distant you're being? You don't care whether I suffer from those surgeries, you're not looking at that. You don't get it. You used to, but now you don't. I hate that, I don't need a boyfriend like that. What's the point of us going out if you're not even thinking about my wellbeing? I mean, right?* No, I say. No, you got me wrong, I said this because I'm trying to think more seriously about you, Chieko. I just really don't want to lose you, that's what it comes down to, I swear. Maybe you're right and I can only say this because I'm not the one going through it, but I want you to survive even if that might mean you losing an arm in the process. I will keep loving you all the same regardless. *Takuya, you're not thinking about me*, Chieko says. *In the end, that's just your feelings, isn't it? Just what you want me to do. That's why you can say those distant and horrible things. You know, if, let's say, I lose an arm, then I might just no longer be myself. The person I was before losing my arm and the person that has lost it might be two completely different people, you know? The other day, after I got operated on and returned to my room, I opened my eyes and thought to myself, Thank god, I'm still myself, which means there was a possibility for me to have changed. I could have become someone else, someone that doesn't like you anymore, someone that doesn't remember you at all. I swear. I believed that could have happened. I think our body is an integral part of us, that it can't be detached from our personalities, identity, and the likes. I don't think cutting someone's arm off will for sure change their personality, but it can happen. ...I can't find the words to reply to that. If Chieko is right and our shape dictates our personality, getting slowly eaten by asmas from the inside—losing more and more of herself and shaping into something else—might be causing her to gradually turn into another girl. Maybe everyone's shape changes as our metabolism renews cells and our personality gets altered alongside. And maybe our body and personality grow at synchronous paces*

because the body's gradual changes in its shape cause sensations and auras and all of that to also grow.

I grab Chieko's hands anew despite her shaking me off earlier. *If you are right and tentatively, in the worst possible scenario, you were to lose a part of your body and get reborn as a whole new person, I want you to start over at the very beginning and fall in love with me again.* I appeal to Chieko. Then, I tell her, *I truly love you, Chieko, so I will win your heart over again and make you fall in love with me once more.* Chieko then replied, *Takuya, are you sure you would be able to keep loving a different me just the same? Really? Even if I become a completely different girl?* I can't produce an answer to that. I silently grab Chieko's left arm where an asma had appeared and disappeared, then touch it with my lips. Chieko's skin. Silky-smooth skin, as though it's made out of fine powder.

I'm sorry Takuya, I just wanted to tell you that I want to remain myself and stay in love with you forever...

After I fall asleep while holding Chieko's hands, with her following suit a bit later, a cluster of dreams shows up. The sun, the moon, and stars show up. The rain, the snow, thunder, and storms show up. I don't know the name of the girl with long, black hair flowing down her back who's warping the world. I didn't have the presence of mind to ask the girl who entered our hospital room walking on the ceiling for her name. I woke up with my upper body resting on Chieko's bed and looked up right when she had opened the door and was about to enter the hospital room. I think I was flabbergasted. I was so surprised all my sensations vanished and I didn't even realize that I was surprised. Or maybe I wasn't actually surprised at all. Partly because I had just woken up and felt like I was seeing a continuation of my dream, but most importantly because the girl walking on the ceiling was doing so without a hint of abnormality or singularity or anything, it's like she was doing the most natural thing in the world to her. I almost felt like she'd told me "Huh? What are you looking at me for?" before I could feel any surprise. Her hair and skirt were drooping towards the ceiling.

The world is upside-down, I think to myself. I remember that the hideout of the three thugs who'd attacked me was an upside-down garden and come to the conclusion that the girl right here is the one currently on the run after injuring a police officer and paramedics. She steps over the window above the door with her bare feet and gently strides along the ceiling until right above Chieko and I. I start to smell a scent of coconut from her.

"I came here to check just in case.

"I need three people. But I lost them so I figured you might be interested.

"Eternal sunshine. Shattered glass. Elephant. Elephant is missing.

"Doesn't look too promising, though. You like this girl, don't you?

"You can't really betray her, can you? I don't have an issue with it. I think that's absolutely the right choice.

"It's okay. Just checking. Still, this girl is swarming with bugs. The bad kind.

"I'll give her a hand. Might as well.

"Hey, stealing, losing, being stolen from, eliminating, losing track of, giving up on understanding, losing sight of, turning a blind eye—these aren't bad things."

I've stayed silent up to this point but reply to the ceiling. "Are you talking about these three thugs? Sorry, but that doesn't justify their actions."

"Same for you stealing from them."

I go silent after that reply.

The girl spins and descends from the ceiling. She stands at Chieko's feet on the bed. She looks down on Chieko and says:

"To give, to find, to be found, to receive, to appropriate, to realize what belongs to you—these aren't bad either."

The girl puts a hand on Chieko's stomach. She puts her other hand on Chieko's hips. She moves the hand on the stomach to her chest. Then the hand on the hips to her flank. From the chest to the shoulders, and from the flank to below the armpit. Then she pats Chieko's right arm with both hands,

does the same to the left arm, massages Chieko's neck, then gently pushes down on Chieko's hand with her palms. She stands up.

"Done."

"What did you do?"

"*You'll find out.*"

"Don't touch her."

"Sure."

The girl swiftly returns to the ceiling. Her bare feet quickly travel up before my eyes and are already touching the ceiling. When her feet grazed my nose, the scent of coconut grew stronger. The girl uses foot cream on her heels. One that smells like coconut. Chieko also has a coconut-scented foot cream: 'BURT'S BEES Coconut FOOT CREME with Vitamin E.' Maybe the girl leaving the hospital room while walking on the ceiling is actually another Chieko.

"Chieko."

"Yes?"

This reply comes from the Chieko on the bed; when I looked away from her and checked the ceiling, the other girl was gone. That scent of coconut only remains in my nose's memory.

Did you see? I ask. *See what? The girl on the ceiling. Huh? On what? This room's ceiling. And what's this girl on the ceiling thing about?* A girl was walking on the ceiling. *My tummy hurts. Huh? Sorry, my tummy hurts, can I go to the toilet?* Yeah sure, go ahead. *Thanks. Oh, look at this.*

Chieko sticks out her left arm. There is again an asma close to the skin by her elbow. But this one is a bit different. It's glowing a vibrant light. That gleam sometimes wilts before beaming again. This flickering light is reminiscent of fireflies, but leagues brighter than what their butts can produce. When this almost-dazzling asma is at its brightest, Chieko's flesh takes a transparent red and the silhouette of her bones become apparent. This isn't the only shining asma. Counting the ones discovered thanks to this, there are currently 57 asmas inside Chieko and most if not all seem to be glowing. I close the curtains to keep the setting sun's orange light out, erase the ceiling

lamp's white light, and check Chieko's body alongside her. Her naked upper body is speckled with yellow, flickering dots. Her bones are faintly visible. Her imbricated organs give birth to complex shadow patterns.

Doctors are called over and operate on her urgently. They don't know anything about these glowing asmas either. They take out a single asma emitting a white light from its entire body and investigate it but can't figure out what causes the glowing. That coconut girl is on my mind but I don't mention her to anyone. I don't want to create more confusion by telling them how she came down from the ceiling and touched Chieko's body. Was that a dream? I don't know. Either way, I'm certain she's behind this. She changed the asmas inside Chieko. She turned them into glowing asmas. Did she save Chieko?

That apparently isn't the case. The glowing asmas eat Chieko the same as the non-glowing ones, scream when they get attacked, and devour Chieko's body more fervently when panicking. The only thing the glowing helps with is finding out where the asmas are hiding and no longer having to do an X-ray or ultrasound or micro camera scan to know the location of these tiny bugs, but even that doesn't last long; the new asmas born from the parents don't glow the slightest bit, so we have to revert to the old methods anyway.

The surgeries continue, the number of asma goes down, up, down, up, they fight between themselves, and all that does is damage Chieko's body. There's currently a possibility for Chieko to lose both her right arm and left leg. She trembles and cries. She's obviously not frightened at the risk of herself becoming an entirely new person. She's simply afraid of losing the ability to write with her right hand, to stand on the ground with both feet, to run at a decent pace—trivial things.

The doctors are prioritizing removing the non-glowing asmas that are relatively new first. They know that seeing the asmas shining a bright light from within her helps Chieko's mood. Beauty, however lethal it might be to oneself, entices the mind.

Chieko sometimes calls me over at night, darkens the room, undresses, and watches the asmas moving inside her. The yellow and orange lights they

produce are beautiful. Their innate lamp's gradation is perfect, and the patterns of light and shadow depicting Chieko's insides projected onto her skin remind me of Ishihara Tetsuro's traditional Japanese painting *Kyosai*.

Kakio I

What purpose is there in praying? Do we reach salvation by praying? Do we feel better? Do we solve anything, make a discovery, or get a hint towards that end? Of course not. We can't expect the instantaneous action of praying to dispel our worries, solve our problems, or do anything at all. Praying begins and ends within the instant it takes to get on your knees, join hands, hang your head—whatever you want—and think about or voice your wish. You don't do or think anything more than that. Praying is purely about asking for what you want. Not what you will or won't do if you get what you want, or what you will or won't do if you don't get what you want. Kakio's father went to a local shrine every evening from April to July for the hundred visits, and when he did so he merely wished for the cancer devouring his daughter's body to go away; he presumably didn't think that moving across the gravel covering the shrine's grounds every evening would somehow be of any help towards that end. 'Performing a prayer' helps maintain focus while praying and extends the duration of the prayer. That's all. Completing the hundred visits doesn't mean God or Buddha owes you anything in return. The act of praying is fundamentally about asking for whatever you want, but is also devoid of avarice. That's why nobody gets resentful when their prayer isn't granted to them. Nobody thinks *Crap, these prayers were a waste of time* when their dream doesn't come true. When Kakio took her last breath, her father was sad but not for an instant was he indignant at his prayers ending in vain. Everybody knows that. Prayers don't do anything. Praying is merely the act of telling someone who won't even grant you anything—or no one in particular—that you yearn for something.

What purpose is there in conveying your yearning to someone who won't grant it to you?

Is there any unwavering, long-lasting value in the act of putting feelings into words?

Hahahah. Yeah. There is. I won't argue that's the case for all of them, but some of our insidious feelings will...how to say it...eat us from the inside if we don't put them into words.

Fuck, I'm stupid. I thought I'd told Kakio everything people tend to accidentally neglect, but I forgot to tell her just one thing. "I love you." "Thank you." "I won't forget you." "You're already a part of me, Kakio, you'll keep living on within me." I only said shit like that, and yeah I'm glad I at least said these things, but there's one thing I forgot to tell her: "Please don't die." Ahh! Fuck! I'm such a moron! I kept skirting around the subject with "There's no way you'll die," "Try not to think too much about your own death," "Think of dying as another form of living," but I never told her how I truly felt. I actually wanted to cling onto her in tears and beg her not to die. *You can stay sick, you can keep suffering, you can keep crying and wailing in pain and agonizing, I just want you to bear with that and keep on living*—I wanted to be this selfish. But I held back because Kakio didn't have a say in her having cancer. I'm stupid. Seriously. I told her a bunch of dumb, smoke-bomb words to make her look away from her inevitable death, to somehow alleviate that burden, but maybe all these things I thought I'd said for Kakio's sake didn't do anything at all for her? Kakio's approaching death was a matter for herself and only herself, so our consolations and misdirections were of no use. If there was one thing Kakio could have wanted to hear from me, wouldn't that be none other than my actual feelings? Isn't that pretty much all I could have done for her? Actually, no, this isn't about what Kakio wanted to hear. This isn't about what I should have told Kakio. It's about what I wanted to tell her. Because I didn't tell her "Please don't die," it almost feels like I seemed to have accepted Kakio's death, and that's eating me up. Maybe I shouldn't be giving a crap about how I appear in other people's eyes, but I do anyway. And not just Kakio's. I also want everyone else to understand. I want Kakio's father, mother, uncle, aunt, and even cousins to know that, when I paid her visits, when I was at her deathbed, at her wake, at her funeral, I wasn't as reliable as people said I was, and I wasn't exactly a great boyfriend either. I

should have actually clung to Kakio and begged “Please don’t die,” “I can’t have you die” in vain.

Things that one should say despite knowing it to be in vain is a form of prayer.

On the day of her funeral, at the crematory, when Kakio’s little brother rushed out ahead moments before she was to be put into the furnace and screamed “No no no, don’t do it, don’t burn my sister, don’t burn her, don’t burn her, please don’t,” he wasn’t asking the employees not to burn her sister’s body, and he wasn’t pleading his case to the rest of the family either—he was praying: *I wish for my sister’s body not to be cremated...*

I cried when I saw Shouta do that, but those were tears of frustration. I wanted to do that too. *Yeah, I get you, of course you don’t want her to be turned into ashes*—I did think that in the moment and sobbed a little; however, I actually wanted to do the same thing but he’d done it first so if I joined him now I would look like an idiot and I didn’t want people to think I’m an idiot and if I also clung onto the casket the funeral would get actually canceled and I would ruin the day and cause problems for everyone involved and that scared me, so I let these trivial feelings rob that precious moment from me; that’s what frustrated me. Kakio’s parents grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him away from the casket, which was then slid into the small, horizontal hole prepared for it. I think I was gutted. I was gauging whether I could somehow sneak into the furnace’s hole right before they closed the lid. Whether I could pull the casket out and see Kakio’s face just one more time. But then I thought more realistically: Kakio was dead, her body was cold and stiff, the rigor mortis had dissipated, her flesh would have already rotten if not for the dry ice they’d kept her in, and her face which they couldn’t apply the dry ice to must have been pretty damaged, so hugging her body wouldn’t have had much of a point; I thought it would probably summon and ease many emotions, but not love, so I opted against it, but I actually wanted to do it. And I should have. And I should have wailed my lungs out like Shouta had. I could suck up the grossness. I could sort out my feelings later on. I should

have said the words I wanted to tell her: “It’s still too early for you, dammit! Stay with me some more! You can’t die, you big dumb, dummy!”

I loved Kakio. She was the only one for me. But during her last moments, rather than telling her how much I loved her, I wanted her to know I wish she wouldn’t die. *Please don’t die, I don’t want you to die.* These words already contain more than enough I love yous by themselves. The pitiful sight of me throwing a tantrum and bawling my eyes out while screaming would have contained all of my love.

Ahh, Kakio. I beg you, please come back to life. I want you to live again. Then, even if you die once more, I know I can do what I must. I’ll tell you what I’ve been meaning to. I’ll be able to offer you the right prayer at the right time.

Kakio. Making a prayer here is really futile. ‘Futile’ normally doesn’t apply to prayers, but because I know that, here it does. I’m probably not praying right. I might have my own way of praying. That might be writing novels. I must do my best. May thinking ‘I need to do my best, I want to write even better novels’ and acting on these thoughts become my prayer—that is my current prayer.

But my way of praying by writing novels might also be mistaken. Kakio and Shouta’s little brother, the youngest of the family, Yoshinobu, pays me a visit.

Nish-nyoom, my apartment’s doorbell rings. I’m doing the dishes after eating lunch, so I put down the bubbly plate back into the sink. I run the water, wash my hands, turn the faucet away, stop the water, grab the kitchen towel from the rack, and wipe my hands while heading for the entrance. I look through the peephole and see Yoshinobu with unkempt bed hair, accompanied by the grounded Yomiko and her neat hair, both wearing a middle school blazer. I swiftly open the door, trying my hardest to keep my mind empty.

“Hi,” the two middle schoolers say in turn. “Don’t give me that. What about school?” I reply with a smile. “We’re playing hooky,” Yomiko says. Actually, only Yoshinobu is; Yomiko is simply following along. Yoshinobu started seeing his school friends as a metaified concept of ‘friends’ in the

summer of his second year of middle school, and ever since he's been talking about how there's no hope for him and often skips classes. Kakio, Shouta, and their parents all scolded him, insisting he was just poor at making friends, but for some reason I could actually conceptualize quite realistically the difficulty—or even straight up impossibility—of making friends in a situation where all human relationships have already been metaified, so one day I told him, “It's okay, you don't need to go out of your way to make friends. To begin with, friends aren't something you make, it's just something that happens,” and apparently my point got across to Yoshinobu and ever since he, well, ‘adores me’ isn't quite right but you get the picture: we became closer. My guess is that the ‘metaified friend’ relationship Yoshinobu worries about refers to when you and that other person share the same concept regarding the role of ‘friend;’ when both parties have a common understanding of what friends are and how they act in specific situations. I think because of that, when he's talking with classmates, Yoshinobu has trouble determining whether they (or him) are acting the way they do purely out of the emotion that is friendship, or if they are only acting out the role of a ‘friend.’ The cognition that friends act a certain way creates in turn the feeling that, if you act that way, you are guaranteed to stay as friends, which then makes you feel like you're cutting corners (or they are cutting corners with you), and that whole thing adds a veil of fakeness over ‘friends’ or ‘friendship.’ And of course, casting doubts on your own friendship means you also can't trust the other person. In my opinion, you should just like whoever you happen to like without much thinking or holding back. It might be obvious, but when it comes to liking someone, doing so without any conditions or withholding or agreement feels much better.

The process of metaifying creates room for critique—actually, metaifying might be the act of critiquing in itself—and really, the same applies to novels.

I bring grapefruit juice to Yoshinobu and Yomiko, who are sitting on my living room's sofa set. “Yaay,” Yomiko cheers, “Thank you. And sorry for this, Osamu, you must have been working.” “No, it's okay,” I say. I actually

haven't done any work in the past two months. The last thing I wrote was the short story *Light* featured in this month's issue. I should probably be in a hurry to do more, but you can't rush yourself when you're not. Shouta paid me a visit two days ago regarding *Light*, so I figure Yoshinobu is here because of what went over then. As I'm thinking that, he says, "Sorry about my brother yesterday," as expected. "It was two days ago, not yesterday." "Right." "It's okay though. I'm probably the one at fault anyway." "I...don't really get it, honestly." "That's fine. Either way, it's my fault. I really shouldn't have written something so ambiguous. I know that." "But you should be able to write whatever story you want. I mean, it's art we're talking about." "My stories aren't really art, but setting that aside, you still probably shouldn't write any kind of story that you know might hurt others from the get go." *Light* is about the narrator discovering a flashlight in his girlfriend's body and trying to figure out who had put that in there and how as he attends her surgery, however, when the doctors open her stomach, the flashlight had vanished from where the X-ray had confirmed it to be, so they make her pass another X-ray and see that the flashlight had moved to her right arm, and from there begins a game of cat and mouse between surgeons and the flashlight, until the narrator finally realizes that actually the insides of his girlfriend's body was mimicking into a flashlight, so he barges into the operating room to put a stop to her bizarre suicide, but his girlfriend had already passed away from the repeated operations chasing after that flashlight, and the original idea for that story was a vulgar anecdote from a one of Shouta's dumb friends who thought it would be funny to bring a banana when having sex with a girl but he unpeeled the thing before using it so it broke inside and wouldn't come out, and while he was resolute to dig around with his fingers to get it out, the girl was embarrassed and asked him to turn off the lights, so he ended up having to rely on a flashlight to know what he was doing, but they got horny during the process and inserted the flashlight which then got caught in a bone and wouldn't come out, so they ultimately called an ambulance and the girl was operated on in urgency, and she obviously dumped him

for making her go through all that embarrassment. What annoyed Shouta, however, wasn't that I used one of his friends' dumb stories as inspiration, but rather the twist that the narrator's girlfriend was unconsciously trying to commit suicide. He had barged in yelling, "Kakio didn't fucking commit suicide!" There was a period when Kakio was giving up on life and refused all kinds of treatments, and Shouta thought I had written about that. That thought hadn't crossed my mind. All I'd felt about that end came in the form of a surprise at myself, mixed with exasperation and resignation, for killing the girlfriend in my fiction when mine had already died a slow and painful death from a disease. Since I had never imagined that Kakio could have considered suicide in any way, I was confused at Shouta when he yelled that. I thought, *Huh, I guess you can interpret it that way too.* But I couldn't flat out say I hadn't intended that when writing it. I cannot make any absolute claims about the stories I write. Maybe a tiny part of me suspected that Kakio's death had been a suicide or wanted it to be—I couldn't erase that possibility.irate, Shouta asked me what I actually intended *Light* to mean, but I couldn't answer him. *That story didn't turn out that way because I specifically intended it to, it just happened on its own.* Shouta's anger finally erupted at these words: he asked me to take responsibility for my own writing and to tell the publisher to call back all magazines with *Light*, which wasn't in my power, and to begin with fiction are just the product of imagination, they have no correlation with actual events, but of course I didn't sound convincing telling him that when the 'flashlight inside the body' part came from a real story. Shouta kicked the fax machine that was about one and a half meter off the ground on the shelf next to my desk and sent it flying to the ground. I slowly repeated to him that Kakio wasn't on my mind at all when I wrote that story, that the girl dying at the end was also a surprise to me, and that I never thought for a single second that Kakio had given up on living during her long hospitalization.

"After that he came home and sobbed like a baby again," Yoshinobu says. "All everyone does is cry. Can't they be even just a bit relieved? I mean, sis finally got freed from all that suffering and, like, it must have been a strain

visiting her so much and paying for her stay and all the treatments, money-wise...”

“Kinda, yeah,” I say while wondering if I had truly meant what I’d told Shouta back then or if I had just told him what he wanted to hear.

“Again, I’m not here to complain about the same things my brother did, but how is it actually? Can feelings you weren’t even aware of transpire in your writing?”

“Hmm,” I start thinking. “Well, words affect both the conscious and unconscious, after all.” It’s not like all words that come out unconsciously are genuine and all words that come out consciously are deceitful, the unconscious probably affects both the conscious and the unconscious, meaning the unconscious can be unconsciously made deceitful. People can mean multiple things genuinely anyway. We’re not limited to one. We also probably have multiple unconscious competing with each other. “Couldn’t tell you,” I say to Yoshinobu. I add, “My feelings sometimes transpire, I bet. But I doubt *everything* is some kind of representation of my thoughts. It’s not like horror writers all want to kill people in brutal ways. Well...” ...Is this actually right? Don’t people who write novels that revolve around murders have an earnest interest in that subject, i.e. find murders appealing, and would thus fancy killing someone themselves under specific conditions? Similarly, doesn’t my heart wish for Kakio’s death to have been a more deliberate one in the form of a suicide? Kakio had no agency. She was at the mercy of her cancer. So maybe, seeing that, I felt a need to recontextualize it as something Kakio was in control of.

“Right,” Yoshinobu briefly says before going silent.

“That seems difficult to tease apart. Well, not like I know anything about all that, or how hard it is,” Yomiko says. “I’ve never written a novel after all.”

“I mean, can’t you just imagine yourself doing so?” Yoshinobu tells her. “Why d’you always give up everytime something difficult shows up?”

“Ah, sorry...”

“I’m not asking for an apology. Why d’you apologize so quickly anyway? You didn’t do anything wrong, did ya?”

“But...”

“It’s because I sounded a lil’ angry, right? But what’s the point of apologizing just based on people’s mood? Nobody’s actually sorry and the only self-reflection that comes out of it is ‘I shouldn’t anger them next time,’ isn’t it? Screw that.”

“Okay. I understand.”

“Do you really?”

“I do, I do. So don’t be mad, please. I get scared and can’t think straight when you do.”

“I’m not really mad though.”

Yoshinobu is just a tad irritated. It might be because I can’t seem to put the right words on what I’ve been doing. He might be frustrated at me, an author, for being unable to find the words to explain something. Maybe he’s internally asking me to take responsibility for my writing, like Shouta did. Or maybe he’s still under the shock from Kakio’s death nearly half a year later. The mere thought of death can affect one’s mental state. Remembering about an actual death can easily hurt people. The waves emanating from that painful memory might still be assailing Yoshinobu. Or no, maybe it’s way more simple: He’s not satisfied at the quality of my story. He might think that, for something I wrote shortly after his sister passed away, my handling of the human death was poor—either lacking in realism, was completely off-the-mark, or something else. Or maybe we’re in the same boat and he’s enraged at me for having written a story about a girl’s death so soon after having lost Kakio...

“Osamu,” Yoshinobu addressed me.

“Mhn?”

“Should we, like, not come here anymore? We as in, me, her, my brother, you know.”

“Huh? Why’s that?” I say despite knowing full well.

“Eh? I mean, my sister is no more, so, like, there’s nothing connecting us anymore, is there?”

Exactly. I’ve also been pondering about what’s the norm in situations like these, what people usually choose to do. But this conversation made it clear to me what Yoshinobu wants. He doesn’t want the textbook answer. He’s asking for what *I* want.

“Aren’t the three of us casually meeting up right now despite Kakio not being here? No need to change anything, it’s happening naturally. Relationships are only the business of the concerned parties, in the end.” A nice line strikes me, “There’s no need to metafy relationships. Okay?”

“Oh, yeah... Haha.”

“Good. Critiques don’t matter.”

They actually might. Some people might criticize, disparage, or simply give us weird looks for keeping this relationship going, but we can just ignore them. The issue is that they are hard to ignore, but it’s ultimately up to each person whether they care about how they’re perceived.

After that, Yomiko suddenly breaks into tears while drinking her grapefruit juice from her straw. *Sorry, sorry, it’s nothing*, she says as she quickly puts down the glass. Half-surprise and half-smile, Yoshinobu inquires for the reason, to which she answers, *I mean, I’ve no idea what ‘metafy’ means but I’m too scared to ask but I know I can’t let that scare me but I’m still scared anyway...* Her crying then amplifies.

Hahaha, I laugh. Her earnest tears are surely right, and that was probably something she needed to say for herself. Yomiko had managed to get the words that were eating her up out of her system. My guffaw is full of admiration at that feat.

Yoshinobu is also laughing, but that’s to hide his fear. He’s shuddering at how someone’s words, atmosphere, expressions, and existence itself can frighten someone to this degree yet attract them all the same. So he’s chosen to cover up his emotions with laughter for the time being.

Whining about us laughing, Yomiko raises the volume of her cries once more, to which Yoshinobu and I follow suit with our laughing at her sobbing. Yoshinobu seems a tad relieved. Noticing that, I also kind of feel relieved myself.

Sasaki Taeko

I learned how to fix dreams from an old man I met in my sleep at age 13. People's dreams sometimes break, and without dream repairmen like him, we can't sort them out properly. The man's name is Mister Sister. He starts by teaching me the biggest secret: Every dream each person sees at night is a fragment of a single, gigantic narrative, and putting all of everyone's dreams together would result in a super long and awesome story. The distributed fragments of that big dream story sometimes break from rain or wind before reaching the person they are destined for, and that man is in charge of fixing those. He pays me a visit on a certain October night. There is a typhoon in town, and the aggressive rain slightly but surely broke all the inhabitants' dreams a tiny bit.

I find myself standing on a super vast beach next to some kind of ocean. I can only distinguish a thin strip of blue on the horizon, the flat surface of sand surrounding me seems to never end. Opposite to the ocean, I can see a village and my own footsteps that come from there. The heavy clouds above me are more black than gray, they look about to fall off any second now yet somehow manage to stick to the sky. I have a feeling they would produce something considerably worse than rain, so even though I seem to have been walking towards the ocean, I ask myself if I should actually turn around and head back to the village, ponder for a bit, then decide that yeah, that is a good idea, and start trailing my footsteps. Because of how damp the white sand is and the backpack on my shoulders, sand enters my shoes and gives my ankles a cold sensation every time my feet sink into the ground. As I keep walking, my head hanging, only paying attention to the trail, my feet digging into wet sand at every step, I find footsteps that don't belong to me. Those extend parallel to mine from the village's direction, but cease right there. Huh? It's like this person was headed for the ocean and suddenly disappeared halfway through the beach. That person was following my steps for the longest time. Why could it be? Only one person would follow my steps. It's her. That girl.

But while I can picture her face, no name comes up. She has straight, short, black hair, a small face, a large forehead, thin eyes, and....ah, she's smiling? Who is this girl? I try matching all the girl names I know with her face in order, but none feel right. *That's weird*, I think to myself and notice: Who the hell is she? I don't know her. Thinking about it, I don't know this girl. *Damnit, brain*, I tell myself and attain another secret of the world: Oh, this is a dream. Ah, so I'm sleeping right now. I'm dreaming. For some reason, I feel super relieved knowing that. I was anxious like never before from the bizarre atmosphere of the clouds and the beach and how dark everything is, but now I'm suddenly feeling fine. This is the first time I've noticed that I'm dreaming inside a dream. I wanna keep watching this dream for as long as possible, then. Enjoying a dream inside one is kinda rare.

Looking ahead, there is a shed I didn't notice before further on my path. Some kind of big animal is moving inside. I make my way there, digging into the wet sand at every step. Inside that worn-out shed, made of smooth trees dried up entirely to reduce weight, I find two camels. Both Bactrian camels. With disheveled short, brown fur, they keep moving their mouths to the side like they're chewing on something while making sounds like *mhunghhh-blbrrbluuu*. I figure I should take the opportunity to feed them and look for the green grass that usually sprouts on beaches. I barely spot a weed I don't recognize on my side of their fence and start making my way there when someone comes out of the shed.

It's Captain Hook. Everything else properly looks real, only he is cartoonish. A bright red pirate hat, a bright red coat, bright red pants, and white frills coming out of his pants and coat's sleeves. More frills on his collar. A white feather on his hat. Were the tips of the boots enveloping his stuffy pants not as sharp as they are, his outfit would be reminiscent of Santa. But his mustache and hair are black and he seems evil and has the typical hat of a pirate captain so yeah this is definitely Peter Pan's enemy from that Disney movie, but looking closer he has both hands and no hooks. As I'm wondering what the hell he's called now without his namesake, he notices me and zooms up

to me in a cartoonish fashion. His swift steps seem to ignore the sand altogether. "Hey, how did you get here?!" he asks me, looking about to grab my collar any second. "What? I mean..." "Ohh, I see, you've noticed, you've noticed! You've noticed where we are! Aye aye aye!" "I don't know," I tell him. I have no idea where this beach is supposed to be. ...Hold on. Captain Hook isn't saying I've noticed where this beach is, but that I've noticed I am in a dream. "Oh, you mean that I'm drea- " -ming this, right? But Captain Hook covers my mouth with his white gloves as he breaks into nonsensical screams like "Don't don't don't say it Jizou!" before I can finish my sentence. "You caaaaan't say that!" Hook's cartoon eyes are glaring right at me. "Noticing is fine. Finding out is fine. Nothing you can do about that. No use brooding about what happened. You may notice alright. You may find out alright. But you should keep it there, alright? Why say what you've noticed to others? Why say what you've found out to others? You don't need to! No need to say anything, just keep it there, to yourself! You can't say it. Noticing is fine, but you can't say it. Finding out is fine, but you can't say it," Captain Hook desperately warns me, half-singing, so I tell him, "Okay, okay, I get it." If it's ill-advised, I won't go out of my way to say it. "I won't say it." He then exclaims "Greaaaat!" and puts some distance between us.

"No need to keep our cards face down now. You, me, fifty-fifty. Let's start with introductions. My name is," the man standing next to the camels puts gumption into his voice to announce his name, "Mister Sister! A dream repairman!"

I follow his example and make exaggerated hand movements before announcing my name,

"Misaka Tsutomu! I just entered middle school!"

Dream or not, that made me self-conscious of how dumb that was. Mister Sister, however, doesn't seem to mind it.

"Listen now, Tsutomu Boy, we're going to look for a girl. A girl has vanished from this story. Get on!"

Mister Sister picks me up and places me on a camel's back. Seeing me sit between its humps, he goes "No, not like that," so I start wondering if I should sit on the back hump and place my feet between the humps or something, then I throw a look at the other camel that Mister Sister got on and see that he's riding it like a surfboard with a foot on top of each hump. "Like this!" So I hesitantly put my hands on the camel's fur, grab a hump, somehow manage to stand up, then carefully get onto the humps. Thanks to the camel being perfectly still, I miraculously get in a surfing position myself.

"Alrighty, you did great, Tsutomu Boy. Let's go!" the camel starts running at Mister Sister's words. No, not running. It retracted its legs and started floating before gliding above the ground at high speed. I camel-surf above the dim sand, following Mister Sister. The camel turns left or right depending on which hump I lean more weight towards. I have so much fun camel-surfing I start feeling like playing here forever, but that actually gets me closer to waking up so I focus on the story.

I need to find the girl.

Mister Sister, flaunting his stuffy white sleeves and bright red coat as he surfs ahead of me, gets to where I found the girl's footsteps earlier and where they suddenly stop, starts circling around that spot, then tells me, "Aye, looks like a dream vandal appeared. These rascals enter through the cracks of broken dreams and wreak havoc inside."

Dream vandal, broken dreams—for telling me not to say anything, he sure doesn't hold back.

"What is that dream vandal like?" I ask.

"There are all sorts. Anything the person dreaming finds unpleasant is a dream vandal."

Huh. So nightmares, scary dreams, anxious dreams, and all those things are the work of dream vandals?

Dream vandal, I tell myself. Remember this.

"Are those dream vandals, people?"

"There are all sorts, Tsutomu Boy. *All sorts.*"

“So how are we going to search for that girl?”

“We won’t. Okay, let’s get that dream fixed.”

“Huh? Hold on a second, what about the girl?”

“Nothing. She got taken away by a dream vandal, oh no, anyway let’s fix the dream—that’s all.”

“We’re not going to look for her?”

“Nah, nah, I’ve never gone.”

“What? And it’s fine?”

“I’m doing fine, personally.”

“No I mean, for that girl.”

“Probably not, if I had to guess. Dream vandals are all terrible. All they do is make huge messes.”

“Wow, wait, then let’s look for her. I feel bad for her.”

“Never, never. Actually, it’s more of a can’t do. Can’t do, can’t do. The story’s immensely big. There’s no telling where she went.”

“But...”

“If you really want to look for her, go ahead. You are aware this is a dream. Since you can notice this, you might have the potential.”

“For what?”

“Huh? For what what?”

“Potential.”

“Huh? Ohh, you might have the potential to go outside of dreams.”

“Outside? Is that where the girl is?”

“Possibly.”

“What do you mean ‘possibly’?”

“Anyway, let’s just fix this dream for now. You gotta help me though.”

“Sure. I don’t mind...though I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. But we’ll go searching for that girl after that, okay?”

“No, no we’re not. That’s not my job.”

“This isn’t really about duties, you see...”

“A dream is broken because of a typhoon. I fix it. I fix the next dream. I fix the dream that comes after that. Another typhoon breaks other dreams while I fix more. I go and fix those. That’s my job. Why are dreams this *fragile*, I wonder. Well, them being so fragile, brittle, and weak is what lets me do my job.”

“How can I find that girl?”

“This is your dream so it’s your life. This girl exists somewhere in your life, and now she’s been taken away somewhere else. The girl might already have been taken away when you wake up from this dream, or maybe you haven’t even met her yet. You are a gentleman so I’ll be honest with you. When that girl vanishes, it will be too late for you to look for her. Aside from metaphors, it’s impossible for one to step outside their own life. And that girl will leave your life because of a dream vandal. How are you meant to search for something that’s not in your life?”

“You talked about potential earlier, what was that about? You said I could potentially go outside of dreams, will I find that girl there?”

“Somewhere.”

“How can I go outside of this dream?”

“You gotta leave before I fix it though.”

“Then get me out.”

“Listen, you’re the one having this dream, what would happen if you left it?”

“What would happen?”

“Never done it, *je ne sais pas*.”

“The hell, I’ve no idea what you’re saying.”

“Then help me fix this dream. I might or might not teach you how to after that.”

“But I can’t get out once it’s fixed, right?”

“You’ll fail anyway.”

“The fuck?” I recall as I say that: This is a dream. Everything will be gone once I wake up. Even if I somehow find that girl inside this dream, that will

also be gone when I wake up. I don't care then. "Fine, whatever. Teach me how to fix dreams, then."

"Okay, Tsutomu Boy. It's simple. *Sois gentil*."

"What?"

"You don't know much French, eh. Be nice."

How is Mister Sister teaching me things I don't know? Or maybe I simply knew basic French like 'be nice' already? Huh? Which one is it? Did I know and forget or did I not know and feel like I used to know after being told the answer?

"Will being nice fix my dream?"

"Correct."

"Easy peasy then."

"No, it's hard. Have you ever been nice to anyone inside your dream?"

I search for an example but nothing comes up.

"It's *toujours* me me me, after all."

I just don't remember much from my dreams. I bet I've been nice to someone at least once.

"Just look at that camel, don't you think it's in pain from you riding its humps?"

I come to my senses at Mister Sister's words and jump off the camel's back onto the sand.

"If you do something because you were told to, that's not being nice, Tsutomu Boy. If you get told off, it's already too late. Kindness needs to come from your own feelings."

I brush off the sand my feet had deposited on the camel's humps. I then caress its back in an attempt to tidy up its messy fur. As I do that, I find a soft and squishy spot on the back of its back hump. The camel makes a displeased *bwshiih* noise while still floating in the air when I touch it.

"That's an abscess," Mister Sister informs me.

It's good to remove pus. I gently split the hair around that squishy spot and dig in with the nails of my thumb and middle fingers. *Mmhgah!* The camel

grunts and shakes its humps. Transparent pus starts gushing out of the notch I dug with my nails.

“Woah!”

“Calm, calm, Tsutomu Boy. It’s all good. You need to remove pus. Kindness achieved, this dream is now fixed.”

“That’s all it takes?”

“’Tis enough.”

“Ehh? Wait, how was it even broken?”

“You realized this was a dream, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“If someone dreaming becomes aware of that fact, it means that dream is broken.”

“What part was broken?”

“All of it. It was such a mess.”

“How do you usually fix them, Mister Sister?”

“Mh? What are you saying? I don’t fix anything. Oh, I fix them, don’t I?”

“You’re losing me.”

“Eh, at least I fixed this one, didn’t I, Tsutomu Boy? This dream’s doing A-OK. The story has been restored.”

“Hmm...”

I did act nice like Mister Sister told me to. But wasn’t kindness ordered by others not kindness? Ah, but when I found the abscess and pierced it, I wasn’t thinking about being nice. I just found it and instinctively felt like I had to remove it.

Thinking that, I realize that must have also hurt the camel, so I pat its hump on the spot that had the pus and tell it, “Sorry for that.”

“*Merci*,” the camel replies.

I wake up in surprise. *That was a weird dream*, I think to myself. I bask in amazement at how bizarre dreams can be. I had realized that I was in a dream, yet proceeded to immediately forget that fact and take everything literally. It wasn’t reality so I could do whatever I wanted, no matter how crazy, but I

ended up adhering to the context and logic present there. When I heard “This dream is broken” I thought “I need to fix it,” and when I heard “Be nice” I thought “I should be nice.” I should’ve ignored those. But I can still feel among my feelings the impulse to go search for the girl that disappeared. That girl was dear to me. I can’t remember her name and I don’t have a clear face in mind either, I only kinda remember the general aura around her existence after waking up, but that girl feels like she is dear to me.

Pfft, kss kss, I giggle inside my bed. That’s the girl I love. Dreams are crazy. They can make a nobody into someone I love, and still leave me with affection towards that girl after waking up. How does the emotion known as love come to be? Does it come from yearning? Is it connected to that? I don’t especially want that girl. What I feel right now is...a desire to see her. I want to meet her, to see her face, to talk to her, to hear her voice, to hold her hand, to touch her body... I think I have preferences in terms of what kind of girls I like or not, but even though I don’t remember the face of that girl from my dream nor know much about her voice or personality or anything, I know I love her. I fell in love with that girl inside my dream—or rather, I already liked her inside my dream, then she went away in that dream, and when I woke up I had decisively lost her. And because I love her, I feel sad on my own. She is somewhere far away and I know that these feelings come from a dream so I will slowly forget them with time, but being in love is quite a pleasant emotion to have, so losing that is, yeah, sad...

Or so I used to think and almost resigned myself, but I managed to conserve that love. I love that girl whose name I don’t know, whose face I don’t remember, and whom I know nothing about; she’s dear to me, I need to go look for her now that she’s gone—the sensations I felt when thinking this has never left me. These are the only sensation I make sure to treat with care so I don’t accidentally break them; they can take the form of some white and muddy, warm yet delightfully-sweet bath water which filled my heart—weighing it down in the process while nevertheless satisfying a newfound addiction—upon me fixating on my strong feelings of love for her, or perhaps

the form of a restless itch, deep in my inner thighs, urging me to go look for that girl.

I then became better and better at breaking and fixing dreams.

The me inside the dream inherits my feelings of 'I love her' and 'I need to look for her,' and for some reason me taking notice of these romantic feelings starts directly linking with me going *Oh, this is a dream*. All I'm doing in the real world is taking the utmost care of my memories of love, but inside my dreams I still seek the girl I love, and my concrete feelings of wanting to see her, to search for her, serve as proof that I'm inside a dream, and taking the first step towards looking for her makes me realize that I'm dreaming. Maybe it's because I'm too convinced that she only exists inside my dreams.

I walk looking for her inside my dreams. Realizing that I'm doing that leads to realizing that I'm in a dream. By entering the world of dreams, the distance between her and I shortens and her existence becomes more tangible. I rejoice. Inside my dreams, there's at least a possibility of us meeting. That can't happen in the outside world. I still can't remember her face. I might only be having fun seeing my affection grow more concrete, or so I think to myself in a dream. Still, I am undoubtedly seeking for that girl I know nothing about. Constantly, relentlessly.

However, dreams have their own stories. I fly in the sky and crash head-on into a flock of gulls. I go around a dim apartment complex's corridor with three friends from elementary school taking a peek at every open door. I feel an urge to help the weird old lady that's half-buried in concrete in a parking lot next to Tamagawa River and screaming in agony. I spot many cats being washed away in the Nogawa River and try to scoop up at least the one I like with a hand net so I can keep it. Despite being aware that these are dreams, I don't come down onto the ground and avoid the gulls, I explore that apartment complex without knowing what I'm looking for, I pull on the lady's hand, and I pat the cat in my arms. The power of stories in dreams is immense, going against it is almost impossible. The only thing I can do is focus on wanting to be nice to someone to fix the dreams I break, as this feeling

sometimes manifests itself into actions. I become desperate to unearth the gross lady in the parking lot, and I leave my house and return to Nogawa River to ask everyone around to save all the other cats. Some dreams I feel like I did a good job at fixing, and some I wake up from feeling like I didn't.

I feel like I'm still stuck watching that dream where I met Mister Sister. That dream's story is still weighing on me.

I then meet a dream vandal and delve a few layers deeper into the world Mister Sister lives in.

I fall asleep during a lecture about quadratic functions and am still in class listening to that lecture in my dream; the teacher's voice in the real world is the same as the one in the dream but passing through the membrane of the dream turns his words into pure nonsense, like "When my mom carves a hole in natto along this parabola, it attains the best flavor possible." I've never before realized that I was in a dream inside such a short nap and equally short dream, but this time I do. I tell myself, *I need to go look for her*. That thought now instinctively comes alongside the realization that this is a dream. I dream, I feel the need to look for the girl, I realize this is a dream.

A huge snake with thick hair is passing by the classroom in the corridor, rubbing its hair against the window. Because I know I'm dreaming, this two meter wide, probably dozens of meters long snake, inside the dream, even though I know this is a dream, scares me. Things established to be scary are still scary. I don't know how, but the snake finds its way into the classroom next to us. The door gets slammed open and a ruckus occurs behind our classroom's back wall. We and the teacher just keep the lecture going. We're all of the same mind that panicking and making noise would just invite the snake to come back. It's already passed by this classroom once, it probably won't come in here. I should just wait it out. *But I need to fix this dream*, I recall. That huge snake is definitely a dream vandal. A bunch of students are running around in the classroom next over, getting caught, and swallowed whole. That's now this dream's story, there's no helping it. But the fact that I'm

aware this is a dream means I broke it, so there must be a crack or hole somewhere in this dream. *That snake might leave this dream*, I realize. That's the first time I consider the idea that something might leave a dream, and that makes me feel like this dream is special. I stand up from my chair and walk past the students listening to the math lecture up to the classroom's door. A brown fur with tints of purple on the surface is restlessly brushing against the door's window from the outside. I stand stock still in fear. Screams are still ringing behind the wall. I need to go. I need to motivate myself. I pump myself up. "RAAAAH! LET'S FUCKING DO THIS!"

Where are you going, Misaka, the teacher asks, waking me up and instantly transporting me from the door back to my seat and erasing the snake and the screams and the tension as general laughter arises around me. *That's some spirit, eh*, the teacher says, pouring oil on the flame. Laughter continues. But I haven't forgotten the reality from that dream and glance at the corridor in search of that dream, strain my ears looking for screams behind the back wall, and check that this world is doing fine. But that dream burst halfway through and I left it still broken... As I think so to myself, unable to answer everyone's laughter with even just a fake giggle, I spot a man walking in the corridor. A dirty brown jacket. Messy hair. Unshaven beard. Saggy cheeks and meaty eyelids. Green eyes under the latter. No matter how I spin it, this man that looks on the verge of homelessness shouldn't have any business being in this school. He could be the father or brother of a poor student but I can't bring myself to believe that. That's because a powerful instinct exploded inside my head and bloomed into the conviction that this suspicious man walking in the corridor is the snake that just crawled out of my broken dream. The man comes from the same direction as the snake and is walking past our classroom at a similarly slow pace. I stand up, get met by the teacher saying *Let's all calm down and return to the lecture, just sit down Misaka*, but I ignore that, pay no mind to the other students convinced I snapped after being laughed at so much, and head for the door in the back to catch up to the man. When I get about two meters away from the door, the teacher calls my name

once more and the door opens without my influence. The man is standing behind it with a bright-red face; he yells at me, the other surprised students, and the teacher.

“The fuck is wrong with you?! Stop laughing at people, goddamnit! Get off your high horse! I’ll fucking kill you, gee!”

He says before throwing a glance at me and raising a trembling right hand. That crummy hand blackened from grime is holding a kitchen knife. I glare at the man. He flinches a bit, averts his eyes, and slams the door shut.

“What the hell was that!?” Right after a friend of mine—still roused by what happened—says that, the door to the classroom next over opens, shortly followed by screams and the sound of desks and chairs being moved. Again.

I open the door closed by the man. He’s already inside the other classroom. The snake is trying to swallow people.

The man’s knife first stabs the person in charge of teaching Japanese in that classroom, then three girls and one boy seated nearby the door, and one girl who was slow at running away. That classroom has two brave boys who beat the man to death with their chairs. I observe the man’s head splitting open.

What is this? Why did this happen? A dream vandal should have left the dream and entered another. But that snake didn’t move to someone else’s dream, it entered my reality. This very world nobody questions the authenticity of... So what, is it actually a dream?

Mister Sister said that putting all the dreams together results in a single story. What if dreams aren’t in a separate dimension from reality but are a real world of themselves, and the world actually doesn’t stop at one’s cognition but only truly becomes the World by including all things one doesn’t know and even fictional things in it? Dreams would thus be included in the World and Mister Sister’s claim would make more sense. All sorts of things appear in one’s dreams. Things that exist, things that don’t, things they know, things they don’t know, things they’ve imagined, things they’ve never

imagined. If all the dreams from around the world put together make the World, this reality I'm in might also exist in someone else's dream. I'm awake...at least I think I am...so this dream I'm present in would belong to someone else who's yet to realize that this is reality. If dreams and reality exist side by side while including each other, and the people inside dreams and we looking at those dreams from the outside exist on the same plane, setting aside the complexity of the structure of the World, I'm glad. If dreams and reality aren't separate but dreams are just finer divisions of a broadly-defined World that also includes reality, and the World exists by looking at everyone's dreams, then dreaming means looking at the World, and the people you meet in dreams belong to the World and thus might exist in Reality. The girl I love might also be somewhere in this reality.

From this incident, I earned myself the nickname Precogner and became a tad famous for having prophetic dreams. And from this tiny bit of fame a bunch of troubled people from all around the world come grasping at the straw that I've become to them. I get asked to tell them their family's fortune to come, to predict all sorts of cases and accidents all over the world, or to expose terrorists' ploys, and of course I don't have an answer to any of that so I just tell them that the World is vast and understanding it is basically impossible, but then I finally find my first love among the requests asking me to search for objects or people.

That girl is Sasaki Taeko, a second-year middle schooler who went missing at a tourist destination last fall. She was last seen on the Tottori Sand Dunes. I didn't know that back then but there's a spot in those dunes with camels for tourists to take pictures with, and Taeko vanished while she was riding one with her parents.

Her parents send a letter to my residency in Chofu, Tokyo, and that's how I finally come to know the face of the girl I love. Sasaki Taeko is tall and slender, part of the volleyball club, has short hair, narrow eyes, and her smile is really cute. I have a feeling she's identical to the girl I loved back in that Mister Sister dream, and at the same time I have a feeling she's nothing like her.

But I have no idea where she could be. A dream vandal took her out of my sight inside one of my dreams. And that vandal then disappeared into someone else's dream. The only thing in my power is to look for the person owning the dream she was taken into. I make a homepage with Taeko's picture and the gist of the case in an attempt to attract people who see Taeko in their dreams. I can't have high hopes. The World is vast. Even a dream's subsidiary world that's merely a tiny part of that World is immense, and there's only one person looking at each one. Dreams are vast, I can't imagine a single perspective spotting a specific girl that wandered into one, much less that witness being familiar with my homepage. She might just be appearing as a random Asian in a tiny corner of a random person in some other country.

A few years pass with the homepage not resulting in any new information, and somewhere entirely unrelated to me the police arrest a man in the Yamaguchi Prefecture. That man was keeping his aunt captive on his house's second floor, but then they found three girls' corpses buried in his yard, and one of them was Sasaki Taeko.

I come across Mister Sister in a dream again. The time and place is somewhere, sometime—just a blur. Mister Sister comes out still looking like a hook-less Captain Hook in that fuzzy space, still wearing the same red clothes. Feels weird.

“Aye aye, what is it, Tsutomu Boy?”

“The girl I love died.”

“That's not jolly, eh. What did you like about her?”

“I don't know. I've never met her...”

“I bet you wanna meet her then. Shall I do that for you?”

“What?”

“I've got her with me. Sasaki Taeko.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I want to.”

“I don't recommend it, though.”

“Why?”

“Sasaki Taeko is no longer the same Sasaki Taeko as before. You change when you die. You retain none of your personality from when you were alive.”

“I still want to see her.”

“To begin with, wanting to meet the dead is unfeasible.”

“Huh?! But don’t you have her with you?”

“Someone else, yes.”

“Who?”

“Doi, the Social Democratic Party’s chairwoman.”

“What?”

“Go back to studying.”

“Wait, wait, wait, Mister Sister, hold on. You’re the dream vandal in this dream, aren’t you?”

“Shaddup! Get off your high horse!”

I have a chair covered in blood in my hand. A light chair made of wood and pipes, the same kind my middle school had. I swing it at Mister Sister. Once the swing count reaches seven, Mister Sister’s head splits open.

Kakio II

My birthday comes around in the middle of summer, and having gone drinking with friends from uni the day prior, I come home in the morning to discover a letter from Kakio in my door's post box. It was delivered yesterday. I bring it into my apartment along with the flyers for pizza restaurants, beauty parlors, and nail salons. I open the green envelope with 'Greene's Mail Delivery' written on it—apparently a service to program letters to be sent on certain dates—and find another envelope inside that has my name written on it with Kakio's handwriting.

Dear Osamu

Happy twenty-seventh birthday!

I really, really love you from the bottom of my heart.

The second biggest reason for why I love you is your kindness.

When I was having a hard time at my company three years ago, you supported me in the way I wanted you to the most. Do you still remember how I spent all my time complaining? (Or maybe you can't tell since I'm still doing that a ton?)

It was right after I got reassigned from general affairs to HR, I nearly got on the wrong side of sort of a faction, but, and even though it was your second year after your debut and you also had a hard time, you prioritized me over yourself. I can't thank you enough for that <3

What should we do tomorrow? Think of something before we meet again. Best wishes a day early this year again! (Sorry, I just want to be the first one to wish you a happy birthday <3)

Looking at this handwritten letter, I recall how beautiful her writing is. I still have even the slightest memo Kakio wrote to me. I have nearly two cardboard boxes of “Don’t forget to take the garbage out,” “I got a call saying the book you asked for at the library arrived,” “I’m off to eat amazing soba prepared by my granny today!” and the likes, and while I nearly threw them away soon after Kakio passed away because it was too painful, the moment I’d finished packing them into garbage bags, I took them out and stowed them in the space above the Japanese-style closet where a hot plate and an 8mm film projector were sleeping, and I’m now glad I didn’t throw them away. I should add this letter to those boxes. Everything needs a place where it belongs, so I’m glad this letter found its way to me. Still, what’s the deal with the “second biggest reason” and “this year again”? Thinking that, I recall I have no memory of getting a letter from Kakio the day prior to my birthday last year. Kakio was still doing fine back then and we had lunch just the two of us in my apartment. She was with me since the very morning that day, so maybe she retrieved the letter she’d similarly had delivered to me the day prior to my birthday. By that time of the year, we’d already gotten the results from her MRI scans and knew her cancer had spread to lymph nodes.

I sit at my desk and look up ‘Greene’s Mail Delivery.’ It has a homepage. I find a phone number and decide to give their company in Aoyama a call. A woman picks up, I tell her I want to check the details of my contract, she asks me whether I’m the person who contracted them, to which I reply that yes, I am. I figured ‘Kakio’ could pass as a man’s name, but she seems to know something and asks me, *Excuse me, are you Mr. Andou Osamu?* I honestly say Yes and she tells me, *We have received instructions from Ms. Yoshimura for when you would contact us via phone or email, may I follow those?* I tell her to go ahead. *Very well, I shall first explain the contents of the contract between Ms. Yoshimura and our company,* the woman then explains that Kakio made arrangements for them to send me a letter on the day before my birthday every year starting last year for a total of 100 letters, that Kakio has already handed them

all 100 letters two years ago and sealed them herself, that they would be delivered every year at my address even after I die, that if my address were to change I could go update the contract with the new one, and that if I didn't want that the letters would instead be sent to my parents' house back in Fukui, and then asked me, *Ms. Yoshimura has also entrusted us a message, shall I read it for you?* I tell her *Please do* while still under the shock from the 100 letters. 100! And it will go on even after I die?!

“Dear Osamu. Hi. How are you doing? Are you still getting by without me? I guess this isn't the time to be asking that. Erm, please have a good talk with your new girlfriend before canceling this contract. Though personally, I would rather you kept it going for as long as possible... Just knowing that my words are finding their way to you is my biggest joy. I'm sorry to be so selfish, but please endure it for as long as possible. I love you. —Kakio.”

Having finished reading the message, the woman on the other end of the phone asks:

Shall I read it again? Or, since this message is handwritten, shall we have it delivered to your address?

Ah, yes, I do want that, but...uhh, could you also send me all the letters Yoshimura gave to you—all the...98 ones remaining, I think?

I'm sorry, our contract with Ms. Yoshimura stipulates at her demand that we either send you one letter on the sixth of August every year, or destroy all of them; we cannot derogate from that.

But I'm the one who receives them, right?

That is most correct, but legally speaking, these letters belong to Ms. Yoshimura until they arrive at your domicile. Again, I apologize, but we will prioritize Ms. Yoshimura's will.

I see. Thank you. Let me think about the canceling, I say and hang up. Is receiving a letter from Kakio every single year on the day before my birthday something I look forward to or not? I don't know yet. Did finding that letter today make me happy? Again, not sure yet. Getting to hear Kakio's voice, or rather to read it, makes me happy, that definitely plays a part in it. The fine

characters she'd inscribed as though an artisan producing confection after confection opened a window to her nature of, how to put it, of a gentle warmth akin to everyone's favorite blankie, and being able to feel that again makes me glad. Not knowing what to do on the day before my birthday and just going out drinking with friends all night to come back to a letter from Kakio puts me at ease, like she's creating a space just for me. I spent all day yesterday thinking only about Kakio and how I'm meant to live now that she's not with me and felt completely disconnected from the people around me and bigger things like society and the world and even myself so I called up Takahashi and Tonoki and went to drink at a boring bar... But what's most on my mind right now isn't really the letters that are about to come but the whereabouts and contents of the one I had supposedly received last year! I can't know for sure but Kakio probably wrote the biggest reason why she loves me in there. Is it going to count down and continue with the third reason? ...Kakio wrote a hundred letters. I could name a hundred things I love about her. If not she would run out of things to say. You can't write a hundred letters with just *Happy birthday!* Not sure I would get anything out of those in that case.

But we're talking about Kakio, maybe she started with a countdown of the three biggest reasons for why she loves me, but after that she'll switch to a different idea and again later to keep things fresh and entertain me in various ways over 100 years.

I put my phone away in my bag and leave the desk. I look back at the clock on it. It's 5:35 AM. I'll go look for the first letter after some sleep. Last year, Kakio came over on the day before my birthday and most likely hid that letter so I couldn't see it. Did she throw it away? ...Good question. Had she written something she didn't want me to see? Maybe something related to her illness? Kakio knew the state of her body and what would happen once the illness spread to the lymph nodes, so maybe she knew she wouldn't be alive next year—that is to say, this year for my birthday—and had written something in that letter she didn't want me to read under those circumstances?

I collapse onto my bed, not even bothering getting under the blanket.

Before falling asleep, I get up, go to the toilet, and brush my teeth in the bathroom. I remember something I'd forgotten to say as the brush rubs left and right against my front teeth. "Thank you, Kakio," I say aloud.

Right now, at least, I'm happy. From the bottom of my heart. But I don't know if these letters will keep making me happy. I mean, they probably will, but I don't know if I'll be able to say they make me happy. I will meet another woman at some point and maybe even make children with her...I think to myself in bed, this time under the sheets, as I fall asleep. My life will be way longer than Kakio's.

Hopefully.

I remember our promise. The sheer length of one's lifetime naturally undermines small promises.

I'm sitting next to Kakio's bed and she's still the only one I love. But her body has become extremely weak and she spends most of her days either sleeping or throwing up. We're at a point where we can't pretend that her medication has the goal of curing her. Nothing in her body will get better anymore. I'm by her bed, writing a novel. I'm way past my deadline and need to write at least ten pages a day to not delay the planned release date. I'm writing a so-called formulaic mystery novel where six girls get dragged into a case and are all attributed one of the six roles of great detective, mastermind, fulfilled love interest, corpse, enraged destroyer, and victim of alien abduction, with a focus on who gets which role every time; I'm already on the ninth installment of the series and the tension is still going strong. I feel sorry for the two girls who get respectively killed and taken away by aliens every single time while searching to elucidate who of them is the mastermind, but this time again I'm going to have the girl who initially came out as the great detective look like she dies part way through the book and get pegged as actually the mastermind before having a UFO suck her up, I'll resurrect the girl who died in the series' third entry and pretend she inherited the role of great detective only to kill her again at the end, I'm fully intending on having the girl

who started enraged stay enraged through the whole thing and have her lash out “What the fuck, am I only here to be angry this time?!” in rage in the finale, and I’ll give the girl who got kidnapped by a UFO and taken to a faraway galaxy at the start and thought she had nothing to do with the case anymore a cool alien husband and make it seem like she’s the love interest while actually having her solve the case as the great detective, then use the fact she took up the great detective role to have her break up with that cool alien male, and I’ll also have the girl who came out as a great detective second be mistaken for the mastermind three times before ultimately having her develop romantic feelings for the girl outed as the mastermind and come out as a lesbian, and I’ll make sure that the mastermind girl spends every single page of the way there extremely afraid of being kidnapped by an alien. With the romance established between the main characters I end up with two fulfilled love interests, but since one of them was exposed as the mastermind, all I have to do is introduce a clone hooked up with all of the mastermind’s memories and nurtured to have the exact same personality without the characters noticing while I throw the original girl in prison and have the copy be the fulfilled love interest—anyway, that’s the boring novel I’m writing: *Lariat Point 9: Goodbye, Dr. Imazato the Science*. I can’t use my laptop in the hospital so my writing speed goes down and my wrists get tired faster, but for some reason I can spend way more time working on my novel when writing things by hand. Since I also spend all of Kakio’s awake time on my novel, she sometimes gets fussy and says *Why don’t you go write at home if it’s to do that?* But these are never because she’s pouting, it’s actually the opposite: seeing me writing makes her anxious about whether her illness is getting in the way of my work, but she also wants me to stay because she would be sad without me, so she ends up crying and apologizing over and over and over and over for being selfish and for getting in the way of my work. We’ve already gone through this process many times already so I tell her the same things as always: “I’m here because I want to be, you have nothing to apologize for,” “Instead of apologizing, you can say thank you if you’re grateful that I’m here, you

know?” Kakio eventually stops crying as I stroke her face, and she gets sleepy. But as always she doesn’t actually fall asleep and tells me this: “Osamu, you know, I really, really, *really*, love you.” *Thank you*, I tell her. She then says, “I’m so sorry I’ll be dying first.” I get the urge to make a joke and lighten the mood but can’t find the words, and I also can’t find serious words either so I just hold Kakio’s boney hand. She weakly tries to take her hand away in embarrassment at how skinny her hand has become, but I don’t let go of it. I then shed some tears. Kakio strokes my hair with her other skinny hand. As we stay like this, I blurt out words while sniffing. “Kakio, I swear. I won’t love a woman other than you for the rest of my life. I promise.” Even though this is genuinely what I want to say from the bottom of my heart, I find myself fed up at how superficial these words end up being—and I’m sure Kakio shares my feelings on this. Both of us know this promise won’t hold water. Human life isn’t so weak that mere memories can bind it down. Even so, Kakio replied “Me too.” This isn’t sarcasm at my thoughtless claim. Nor is it Kakio alleviating the mood with a joke out of kindness. Kakio felt compelled to say this from the bottom of her heart, just like I did, and that’s the entire reason for why she said it. “I also won’t fall in love with anyone else for the remainder of my life, okay?” ‘The few decades I have ahead of me and the mere hours Kakio has are ultimately the same in that they both share an end,’ ‘Eternity is contained within an instant’—this really isn’t about either of those lines of logic. In this moment, both of us merely said in all honesty what we each truly wanted to say, that’s all. But the gap between our remaining lifetimes affects the strength of our words. Even if experiences and memories can’t restrain someone for their entire life, they can last a few years or months at least. Even if my words are bound to let down, Kakio’s will surely hold up. Even if, for instance, we get into a really bad fight and break up, Kakio will need time before she can find someone else she likes. I just know that. That’s how things are between Kakio and I. And the two of us are equally aware: We are tightly connected and losing the other would be really painful, but that pain will not

continue for a lifetime. The same would be true even if our roles were reversed. We are both too proactive to spend an entire life off just memories. And yet, despite knowing this, I still make this promise. I make this promise for the sake of my love towards Kakio at this very instant. I paint the next love that will visit me into a sin. I punish my future self ahead of time. I ought to end my life having only ever loved Kakio. Really. Genuinely. When Kakio expels her long final breath, I ought to swiftly take my own life and depart along with her before she can finish emptying her lungs. Living on without doing that is, however, correct. And yet, I purposely make a mistake and exchange this promise to chastise that correctness. I say the correct words to punish myself. In reality I should die alongside Kakio. With two correct options standing side by side, and both actually being mistakes, what I choose to do is solely to hurt myself. I know I've already made countless mistakes due to this immense love in me. So at this point, I don't mind acting like a certified fool just one last time. I swear. I won't ever love a woman other than Kakio as deeply and strongly as I love Kakio—

It's already noon by the time I wake up. I leave my bed and place the letter I left on my desk inside the box containing various memos and letters from Kakio. I should get rid of these letters and memos when I find someone else I love. I'll also cancel the contract with Greene's Mail Delivery then. Even if keeping Kakio's letters by my side and receiving a new one on the day before my birthday makes it harder for me to find my next love, that's fine by me. I give her the right to restrain me for now. And she accepts it. Also, most importantly, I still love Kakio. Back then I denied the *Lariat Point 9* girl I threw in jail in the final scene the fulfilled love interest role, but that was a mistake: her love did get across right before being sent to prison, and having spent even just a moment together before getting imprisoned was enough to make her love a fulfilled one. That's how love works. It's not about the end result, it's about whether both sides' feelings got across even for just a millisecond.

I'm in the process of writing *Lariat Point 11: Save Us, Mrs. Saeki the Janitor!*, but I cancel my plans for today, call up Shouta, and go visit Kakio's bedroom

in the Yoshimura household looking for a letter to my name. However, I don't find anything and end up only knowing the second biggest reason why Kakio loved me.

Still, in any case, I don't think I'll get to hear all 100 reasons. I love alcohol and tend to overdo it when I drink. I just don't see myself living for 100 more years. Ah, 98 years, I guess. Same difference.

Maybe I'll unconsciously prolong my lifespan from wanting to read all of the letters, who knows. Do stories have that kind of power?

I hope both *Lariat Point* and Kakio's letters do. Genuinely.

Niomo

I board Chofugaoka Niomo to fight God and smash the New World. Niomo only just turned 13 and isn't used to fighting God yet. She's not used to the Rib Fusion nor to me. She doesn't look me in the eyes. She'll die in no time at this rate. If she does, all that'll happen to me is I'll be handed an eighth Eve, but I kinda like Niomo right now. I wanna stick to Niomo for good. Maybe I should clearly convey these feelings to her. Doing so might have a good influence on both Niomo and me.

I head out onto the tarmac to meet Niomo who's coming back to the Chofu base. Among the 230 Eves dispatched from the Chofu base, 216 were able to partake in the battle. Niomo is part of the 14 that didn't and also part of the 68 that made it back alive. This battle was particularly rough. The Committee must be frantically searching for new Eves to replenish our forces right now. As Niomo slowly makes her descent to the ground, I repeat to myself that the most important thing is that she came back alive. We're in a situation where she *really* needs to start partaking in battles. This is already her seventh dispatch. She needs to show some resolve to fight even just a little the next time or the one after at the latest, or she'll be sent on a raid on God as a standard soldier with normal weapons. Which basically means suicide. I'll merely get a new Eve after that, but I'm lowkey deeply committed to my Rib Fusion with Niomo right now, so I might need some time before I can yield a rib to that next Eve. And in the meantime, I'll have to idly watch the battle against God from the backlines while I endure my self-esteem boring a hole into me. If losing my Eve proves to be too big a shock and results in my status as an Adam being stripped from me, I'll also end up on the waitlist for a suicide mission as a standard soldier. I really doubt I'm that invested in Niomo, but if she were to ambush God with just a pistol in hand after losing her Eve status and died from it, I would at least sleep worse at night. I need to devote my entire being to all my Eves...while also staying level-headed enough to remain an Adam even after losing one.

Niomo comes down, wearing a jersey dress shirt and jeans. Her eyes are swollen from the tears she shed. The shock she'd received didn't diminish no matter how much I tried to comfort her while holding her rib. She wasn't just lucky for coming back alive, but also for not developing hypoxemia after crying so much 7,000 meters above ocean level. I choose not to reprimand her. Yoshimi, her best friend, was killed by God right in front of her eyes. This is her first time having a friend die, so I'll make an exception just this once. I fail to notice that Niomo is barefoot until right before she lands. I click my tongue. We seriously need to change stuff. Maybe I should be even more proactive in fusing my ribs with Niomo. If I can't even notice that my Eve took off her shoes, we're nowhere near ready to fight God.

"You were brave," I tell her, and Niomo stays silent for a while. She doesn't look my way. I take a step towards her. I ponder whether I should give her a hug. Her tiny shoulders and the slender arms dangling from them seem to be yearning for one. I can tell. But my moment of hesitation spoils her mood. Niomo hugs herself with her arms. I at least try to wrap my arms around her back, but the moment my hands are about to touch her nape, it escapes me.

"Where's Tetsurou?" she asks. "I need to pay him a visit." Nagasaki Tetsurou is Ruru Yoshimi's Adam. When God turned Yoshimi into a cryptic mineral, Nagasaki stabbed his own stomach with her rib. Yoshimi was his second Eve, and they'd been together for six years. Nagasaki imprinted a dent the shape of his fingers onto Yoshimi's rib from gripping it. He held it towards himself and, before Yoshimi fully transformed into something else, shouted "I love you, Yoshimi! I'll never hold another rib that doesn't belong to you!" and stabbed his stomach. It's rare but not unheard of. But the medical team's urgent treatment threw water onto Nagasaki's parade by easily saving his life, and now he's undergoing rehabilitation with a therapist and will probably receive a new Eve and return to being an Adam eventually.

Still, what matters is that this Adam stabbed his stomach with his Eve's rib in an attempt to die with her.

“Tell me, where’s Tetsurou?” Niomo asks again.

“Nagasaki is doing fine, he’s surrounded by many people who care for him. You should go rest, Niomo. Don’t overdo it.”

“I’m fine. I just want to talk to Tetsurou. Tell me where he is.”

“Higashiyama Hospital.”

“Huhhh? Why for?”

“When Yoshimi died, he stabbed himself in the stomach.”

Niomo is speechless.

“But he didn’t die. He’s getting treatment at the hospital and must be sleeping right now, I bet.”

Niomo put a hand over her mouth. She closes her eyes. Tears well up to her closed eyelids.

“I see...” her voice filters out of the hand covering her mouth. “So that’s why. I saw Yoshimi smile at the very end, actually. I wasn’t sure what that was about, but now I get it...”

Niomo keeps covering her mouth as she cries to keep all kinds of warm stuff from flowing out, but can’t do anything against tears and mucus; she’s sniffing like crazy. She would also be sniffing with her eyes if you could suck tears back inside. Niomo shows me these tears despite not being comfortable with it because she hopes I will decipher what they want to tell me. Niomo isn’t crying out of pity for Nagasaki and Yoshimi’s tragic fate. Niomo is jealous of them and wants something similar for herself but knows she can’t and is frustrated and sad at our relationship not being that way but she doesn’t know why it can’t be like theirs, and that’s what is making her cry. I then notice Niomo looking at me looking at her sobbing and averting my eyes in silence, which informs me that she knows I’ve picked up on her feelings.

“I’m done,” she announces in between two snuffles. “I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“Do what?”

“Being an Eve. I’m tired.”

“You should get some rest;”

“That won’t do crap, we’re not properly linked at all, are we? I just can’t fight, no matter where I go. Breaking ribs for that...it’s a gigantic waste. Give my bone back.”

“Please, calm down first.”

“I’m sick of it. We’re not getting anywhere. I’ve had enough. Everyone changes before my eyes into, like, something beautiful, and yet I just...”

“They die, all of them. They don’t *change*.”

“They do! You just say they die or get killed, or rather you’re made to say it, but that’s not the truth at all. They all turn into something pretty or even wonderful.”

This is how fights are against a shapeless God that takes the form of whatever the observer wants, wishes for, or looks forward to. People don’t actually die. They turn into something different, or sometimes something unknown. And in most cases, these look pretty in our eyes. It’s not like Yoshimi became a big boulder; she turned into a mesmerizing shiny jewel with a purple gradation. But what is that, if not death?

“Can I be honest with you? I just can’t see the two of us becoming good Adams and Eves.”

“It’s still too early to conclude anything.”

“No it’s not, this was fucked from the begining anyway. I mean, I had someone I liked already, you know? And yet I was forced to leave him, got stuck with you, and even had a rib removed... What the hell? What did I do to deserve that? I don’t give a fuck about God. I don’t care that we’re all going to get killed by God. Not like getting killed is painful or anything. You just turn into something pretty or a weird, cute animal anyway. That’s fine by me, I just don’t care anymore. I want to stay with the person I love at least until God turns me into something different.

“Yamakawa wasn’t an Adam so he must’ve become a normal soldier somewhere. He’s not in Tokyo.”

“I’ll search.”

“Eves aren’t permitted to leave the front. If you leave this base unauthorized, I’ll have to pilot your rib and forcefully make you attack God.”

“I don’t care. Go ahead if that makes you happy. Kill me and get your next Eve, why don’t you? You’ve already gotten over six, right? Keep that up and kill your seventh Eve and immediately forget about her.”

“I don’t forget a thing.”

“The hell are you saying? You had six Eves already. Your next Eve doesn’t appear unless you’re over the previous one.”

“Romance and Rib Fusion are separate matters.”

“...Of course. I don’t like you at all, after all. Honestly, I hate you.”

“...”

“Why am I your Eve anyway? Someone must’ve screwed up somewhere. This just makes no fucking sense.”

“Calm down. I’m thinking of sticking to you-”

“To me? Huh? Hold on, I might be your Eve but I’m just a normal girl, okay? Don’t talk like I’m your little tool, will you? I can’t believe this guy... You have a loose screw somewhere, I’m telling you. Get your ribs checked one more time, there’s definitely something wrong with you. No wonder my ribs don’t go well with you, stupid, scumbag weirdo.”

“Sorry, I’ll apologize. I didn’t mean it like that...”

“Drop it, I got the picture. You’re a horrible human being, and that probably means I’m the same. Geez, can’t this stop? You know, at least I’m putting some effort into improving myself. I want to become a slightly better person and try to get there somehow. But either I’m doing it wrong, or someone is wrong about me. This is plain awful, I can’t.”

“Listen...”

“Shut your trap. You listen. Don’t think you can get together with me just from one rib bone. I can’t believe it anymore. You and I might have the potential to become great Adams and Eves. But you see, people don’t act only based on potential.”

She’s completely right.

“That’s why I’m saying we should try to make it work together.”

“Make it work? What are you even saying? Make what work? How? We’re already talking it out, aren’t we? I’m sick of training and practices. We’ve done it plenty and *this* is the result. Actually, right now, I hate even just being with you. You keep getting on my nerves, and I’m tired of getting into a fight like we’re doing right now. Are you done? I have to go pay Tetsurou a visit at the hospital now.”

“I’ll go too.”

“Don’t follow me!”

I stop in my tracks. I’m unsure whether I should take the next step or not. I’m starting to think this might be the decisive breaking off point.

Niomo adds while walking off,

“I’ll give the commander a call and tell him I’m retiring. If the next battle starts before you get the results, I can’t be bothered coming back to the base for a meaningless briefing so just make me take off using my rib. And this time, no matter how badly I’m doing, make me partake in the battle. I’ll figure something out. Okay?”

Of course not. But seeing me stay silent, Niomo continues,

“Don’t you think the reason you failed with your six previous Eves is that you’re the kind of person to go through six or even Eves? They all instinctively noticed that, and because of it, couldn’t mesh well-enough with you for you to help them survive, didn’t they?”

I’m pretty hurt. After all, Niomo said this to hurt me. And yet, the Eves in my memory blame me.

Ultimately, I’m the one who killed my Eves, so maybe I’m just not suited to being an Adam? Is there such a valley between having the potential and correctly carrying your role out? How can you measure affinity? I’ve had my Eves partake in over 200 battles, and had them come back to the base alive all but six times. I’ve heard God’s scream nearly 20 times. I’ve been giving it my all, thinking I was needed in this holy crusade. Was I actually just a parasite

consuming Eve after Eve while selfishly obsessing over this battle against God?

After leaving a silence as if wondering if she'd gone too far, Niomo walks past the emergency medics tending to the other Eves' wounds on the tarmac, and all I do is observe her back get smaller and smaller. Niomo doesn't even try to go back on her words because she meant everything she said. She genuinely feels that way. Iijima spots me and runs over to me. Iijima and Mio have only been fusing ribs for about three months, and Mio isn't allowed to partake in battles yet. This raid was just practice for them. Mio should have had no problem coming back in one piece.

"Yo," he greets. "Something wrong with Niomo?"

"Not really."

"You ain't gonna chase after her? I mean, you two had a dispute, right? You really should go, man, don't lose a second."

You couldn't even call it a dispute. "Let her be. She's just a bit excited again," I say, knowing this wasn't like any of our previous disputes. Niomo is trying to make a decisive call. Up until now we've both acted under the premise we should work together, but all we can do now is see whether we can manage without that. Maybe we'll even have to rethink that premise. What am I saying? It's not maybe; we definitely will.

"Take care of your Eve," Iijima tells me. "Haven't ya always been taking good care of them? What's the problem with this one?"

Always. This one. I—and probably Iijima too— am too used to being with Eves. We've let patterns develop in our brains telling us what to do in certain situations and took it too far. We might have been interfacing with Eves in their personal lives with the same mindset as when piloting them to fight God. Niomo...and quite possibly all of the Eves...might be perceptive to that.

"Hear that, Nagasaki stabbed his stomach with Yoshimi's rib," I tell him. "When Yoshimi went down."

"For real?" Iijima asks back, furrowing his brow. "Did he die?"

"He's alive. At the hospital."

“Good. Still, that sorta stuff might seem beautiful or whatnot, but I don’t see it that way. All he got from it is a long hospitalization that’ll ultimately just pull him out of the battle for a while. To me, that’s frankly just cowardice. Though admittedly, he’d have to sort out his feelings after his Eve died before getting ready for a next one anyway. In the first place, it’s not like Nagasaki dying would somehow revive his Eve. It doesn’t do shit. Also, he’ll forget about his previous Eve and accept a new one after enough time passes anyway.”

When it comes to fighting God—and it actually applies to everything in life—people ought to produce their best. Having managed to survive, the next step for Nagasaki will be to choose between going on living or dying once more. And if he chooses to live, he’ll have to sort through his past on his own. Time will solve everything no matter what. What it doesn’t solve, it will dissolve. Making a problem disappear is just another way of solving it. The time that froze for Yoshimi is still flowing to Nagasaki. Nagasaki will be pressed to accept or not the (dis)solving leisurely brought upon by this flow. He’ll probably accept it like most Adams do anyway. We’ve been inculcated a strong sense of duty regarding our battle with God, but even setting that aside, people generally live. We keep on living. Trying to survive is part of our essence as living beings. And as living beings, we exist in the flow of time. Might as well meet this flow halfway, then.

I think I’m harboring the same kind of anger as Iijima towards the fact Nagasaki stabbed himself. It’s like a, *The fuck are you fleeing from battle for, Asshole? A, Don’t throw away your precious life for a single Eve. A, Don’t you dare retire before reaching the end of your lifespan.* Battles are about living, living, and living some more. It’s all about making sure you don’t die. It’s about getting over those who had the misfortune to die and keep on living. I’m also angry at him for throwing cold water on all the other proper Adams’ eagerness to live by getting all fired up by himself and trying to end his life just ’cause he lost sight of this. No matter how sad your Eve dying makes you, it’s not like that sadness will stop your heart. *Come to your senses and live until*

you die, you fucking dimwit—that also makes for part of my feelings. Also, You're not the only one whose Eve died and suffered from it.

Though the Eves probably feel differently than the Adams on this.

"I'm not paying him a fucking visit," Iijima says.

"Nobody told you to, dude."

"What's Niomo gonna do?"

"Shaddup, it's none of your business."

"Right, she was pretty close to Yoshimi after all."

"..."

"If I were you, I'd stay with her for a while. Probably a bad idea to leave her alone. I imagine you already know doe."

"Say...which Eve are you on with Mio?"

"What? She's my fourth."

"I see..."

"What 'bout you? With Niomo."

"She's my seventh."

"Hmm."

"You think it's too many?"

"Seven?"

"Yeah."

"Nahhh. I mean, Tokisaka said he's on his 28th with Yuuko, you know?"

"I guess."

"C'mon, don't let these numbers get to you. Not like you fucked all of them."

"I didn't do it with a single one."

"Neither did I."

Most Adams and Eves generally don't have sex. Creating that kind of relationship makes it impossible to send the other one onto the battlefield. Moreover, Eves are going against God. They have a low chance of coming back alive on any occasion. Did Nagasaki have sex with Yoshimi? If so, he's a moron. Maybe he'd argue the same thing Tsuji once said: "If you choose not

to fuck with a girl so compatible with you your ribs can fuse, *you're* the real moron." But Rib fusion and romance are, as I told Niomo just earlier, separate matters. If you mix that up, you'll end up all shriveled once the girl you love eventually dies and commit suicide, like Tsuji did. Either that or you'll stab your own stomach with your Eve's rib on the spur of the moment, like Nagasaki did.

I take out Niomo's rib bone hanging off my neck by a string out of my shirt's breast pocket. It's white, slender, light, and pointy. Niomo's rib is completely different from my past Eves' —from Shiori's, Yukoko's, Ruuri's, Eriko's, Harumi's, or Kaho's. When Niomo and I meet face to face it never ends well, but the sensation I get when gripping this and controlling Niomo is on a whole other level of comfort than with any of the previous ones. Niomo is sensitive to my slightest movements and my intents get across to her instantaneously with barely any defect. It's been the case ever since our ribs fused for the first time. I knew instantly her ribs were special. And yet I've failed to use Niomo to her true potential. What am I meant to do with her? Why aren't potential and affinity proportional to each other? It would be so much easier if a pair chosen to be Adams and Eves were bound to get along... However, wishing for that is a showing of laziness. Niomo and I both need to redouble our efforts to understand and accept each other. *Fuck*, I think to myself. If that's what Niomo wanted, maybe I should have devoted myself to her deeply enough to stab her rib bone between my own ribs. But what should I even do to get there?

"Anyway," Iijima says, "at the end of the day, the Eves are the ones standing before God with a gun in hand and fighting, try to be nice to them at least. I gotta go back to Mio."

"Aren't we like..."

"Mn?"

"Aren't we too resigned to the idea that our Eves will die?"

"..."

"I feel like part of me has gone numb."

“Heh, did fusing ribs with Niomo cause her feelings of struggle to flow into you through your ribs?”

“Come on.”

“You never know, 'kay? Hahah. But anyway, if Mio dies, I know I'll cry.”

But not stab your stomach with the bone in your hand.

See ya, Iijima says before leaving. Injured Eves are still getting treated all over the tarmac. Almost every Eve has their Adam by their side. An Adam is running next to the stretcher carrying his Eve. As I keep standing still, gripping Niomo's rib, Erika slowly walks my way. Also her Adam, Yoshioka. Erika is holding a white drawstring pouch reminiscent of a gym uniform bag in her left hand. She stops in front of me and holds the pouch out to me.

“Ishihara, here, a keepsake.”

“From who?”

Yoshimi maybe? I ponder as I accept the bag and take a peek inside. If it's Yoshimi's, I gotta deliver it to that moron Nagasaki at Higashiyama Hospital. Maybe I can catch hold of Niomo along the way. We'll have a long talk then, I think to myself as I gaze at Niomo's Nikes inside the pouch.

“...Huh? Oh, you picked those up, Erika?”

“Mhm.”

“Wait? Keepsake?”

“Niomo's.”

“What?”

“Ishihara, you trained her really well. Niomo was so brave... She didn't hesitate a second to pick a fight with God to protect her friends. She roared like a warrior too. Almost like a boy, hahah... N-nhm. S-she, *sniff*, she was really amazing... *Sob*, she was almost, *sniff*, nhm, she was almost on par with God. She was really really amazing...”

Worried, Yoshioka puts a hand on Erika, who's now crying.

“But Erika,” I tell her, “Niomo came back, though.”

“Stay strong, Ishihara. Accept it, Niomo is dead... It saddens me too but...”

“No, I mean, I met her and we talked and all. She wasn’t hurt at all. I mean, she didn’t even partake in the battle, no reason she would be injured.”

Yoshioka butts in, “When was that exactly? You seeing her and all.”

“I mean, just moments ago.”

“Erika,” he says looking at her. His intent got across from just that. Erika raises her face. Her expression has changed. She glares at me, almost like she’s angry.

“You are *sure* that was Niomo?”

“Of course.”

Right after replying, Erika’s somewhat-muscular body bumps into me. I’m being hugged by her. She pulls my upper body down and places her chin on top of my shoulder.

“I get you, you really wanted her to come back, of course. You wanted her to come back alive. You really loved Niomo, Ishihara. Thank you. It might not be for me to say, but I’ll say it in Niomo’s stead: Thank you. She was always worried you didn’t feel the same way about her. But you actually did. I can’t thank you enough. Every time Niomo opened her mouth she talked about you, you know?”

“I don’t really...”

...Have romantic feelings for Niomo, I try to say but my mind gets caught onto the word keepsake. What do you mean, keepsake?

Yoshioka shouts,

“Enemy attack! The epicenter is the Chofu base’s tarmac!”

The medical teams and Eves around us get astir.

I stay dumbfounded at his words until Erika whispers in my ears,

“Ishihara, where did Niomo go?”

“Huh? To Higashiyama Hospital...”

To go pay a visit to that stupid Nagasaki who stabbed his own stomach after Yoshimi died...but I can see Yoshimi seated on the tarmac with blood flowing from her head and a medic tending to her and the stupid Nagasaki in question standing nearby, looking worried...

I then finally open my eyes.

Niomo.

I conjure the name of my hope.

Niomo.

“I doubt she headed to the hospital. She must still be nearby,” Erika says. “It’s probably here to destroy the whole base.”

“Fuck! We were too focused on coming back from the battle,” Yoshioka says. “It’s because this one was so tough...everyone only thought about coming home.”

“I can see her now,” I say. “Over there.”

Erika takes her jaw off my shoulder and the two of them look back in the direction I’m pointing at.

On the other side of the tarmac, in the opposite direction to Higashiyama Hospital—where I saw Niomo walk off towards earlier—I can see her slender back. That’s God. In my eyes, it takes the form of the thing I wish for the most.

“Oh fuck, I see it as a juicy oyakodon,” Yoshioka says. “I’m so hungry.”

“Dummy,” Erika tells him off as she gets away from me and plunges into Yoshioka’s chest. He hugs her back. “I’m off to fight,” Erika says before kissing Yoshioka. “Come back safely,” he then tells her. We didn’t kiss or hug, but I had the same routine with Niomo.

All the injured Eves remaining on the tarmac say “I’m off to fight” to their respective Adam and get a “Come back safely” in return before standing up. All the Adams grabbed their Eves’ rib bone. The Eves start floating and disappear. They’re headed for Niomo all the way in the back at the speed of sound. A huge shockwave resounds from Niomo’s direction. God is smiling with Niomo’s face. She’s looking at me. She’s saying something to me. I rub my eyes. God’s miracle is making me capable of seeing something I normally shouldn’t. I can hear Niomo’s faraway voice when I shouldn’t.

Niomo says,

“I’m sorry I died first, and all on my own. I wish we could have lived longer together. That, or at least died together... What do you think?”

I grip the real Niomo's rib as firmly as I can. I'm the one who wanted to stab this into my own stomach! I'm the one who wanted to die alongside Niomo! I'm the one who wanted to be stupid like the stupid Nagasaki!

Ahhh, Niomo! I wanted you to come back so much...

The faraway Niomo replies, "Me too. I'm sorry I couldn't make it. I even promised I would. I'm sorry. I'm so lonely on my own."

I'll head your way then!

I raise my hand holding Niomo's rib. The sharp end is already pointing my way.

Wait for me, Niomo! I'll show you how stupid I am! I ain't gonna fail this and get carried to a hospital! I'm aiming for the heart!

I press the tip of Niomo's rib against my chest and look for a gap between the bones. I'm considering letting myself fall forward to have the tarmac's asphalt push Niomo's bone in.

I start falling towards the ground like a propped-up rod. But I get stopped before I can reach it and have Niomo's rib stab right through my heart by Yoshioka, who's supposed to be piloting Erika, taking me in his arms.

"Don't do it, Ishihara, you must live!"

"No, I wanna do this for Niomo's sake."

"You're probably just looking at the Niomo you desire, it's not the real one. You might genuinely want to do this for her, but it's not like the real Niomo ever asked you to."

"Still, I want to do it, let me."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because this is your so-called spur of the moment."

"..."

"I know this, that's why I'll have you live. I'll protect you until you cool your head down."

"Please let me die."

"Heh, big words when you don't even truly want that. Moron."

“Huh?”

Yoshioka, holding me in his arms, flips me up before dropping me on the tarmac. He stands up. His face, looking down on me, gets punched by Erika who rushes in at the speed of sound.

POW!

Yoshioka gets flung away. A bunch of Eves zoom by me at the speed of sound to chase after him. Erika is still here.

“Are you okay, Ishihara?”

“What? Uh, yeah...”

“Look. Your left arm. You were being attacked by God.”

Looking at it, my left arm has turned into a weird, mystic plant of the kind I’ve never seen before—but a beautiful one for sure. White flowers are blooming from it. These are flowers from the New World.

“Close one, eh?” Erika says before zooming away and disappearing from my sight.

Erika leaving reveals Yoshioka standing behind where she was. He’s holding Erika’s rib bone with both hands, piloting her. He shoots a quick glance at me, lying on the ground, and says,

“Alright.”

23 more Eves die in this confrontation. It also kills 46 Adams, 269 standard fighting units, 76 base personnel, and over 7,600 civilians. But at the end of it, I get to hear God scream for roughly the 20th time. God escapes into the New World he’s trying to make. Erika and Yoshioka survive, Iijima dies and gets turned into a mysterious, beautiful pink light, and Mio survives for now because Iijima had her take refuge.

I then spend two months consulting a therapist at the base’s rest facility. The mysterious flower God left me with wilts during my stay there, resulting in me losing my left arm without any pain. I then get assigned my next Eve. Her name is Kouno Miki. 16 years old. I hope our feelings will get across this time. Actually scratch that; I *will* make more efforts than ever to make sure they do. I can’t rely on potential alone. I grab Miki’s rib with my right hand

and head into the battle against God. We'll both make it home, no matter what it takes.

Kakio III

The Kakinoki family's eldest daughter Kyouka and her little brothers Kisaku and Jasuke are cursed to kill each other despite loving each other. The first boyfriend Kyouka ever got, Samukawa Andhonuts, sets out to prevent this grim tragedy one way or another, but... The publication of this novel, *Kakinoki Kyouka's Farewell New World*, resulted in both Shouta and Yoshinobu cutting ties with me for good. Kakio, Shouta, and Yoshinobu got along really well and none of the episodes present in my book were based on anything that actually happened, they were all stuff I wrote while smiling like a maniac without a specific intent in mind, but I got a call from Shouta three days after the novel's release who suddenly went, "Osamu, can you suspend the publication of your book this time?" So I replied "Huh? Why? Of course not? But why? You didn't like it?" as the smile on my face got more and more strained. "Fuck no I don't!" That erased all remaining traces of smiling from my face. "The hell are you writing that random shit for?" "What? Random...? I haven't written a single random thing." "You fucking are, about time you realize, don't you think? That stuff's all bullshit." "Bullshit... What do you mean? Never in my life have I written something random or bullshitty, though? At least I don't think so." "Isn't that just 'cause you're writing out of complacency? Anyway, seriously, the fuck are you naming characters after actual people for? In your novel. It's a novel, use your own fucking ideas instead." "I named what? You mean Kakinoki? It's not like I wrote 'Kakio.' Also, Kakio told me I could use her name. And those characters aren't anything like Kakio or you guys anyway." "If you use a name like Kakinoki of course we're gonna think about Kakio. And if you give her two little brothers, it's gotta be Yoshinobu and me." "So what, you think people are going to believe the stuff I wrote? Are you seriously worried about that? You know it has a bunch of stuff like magic, ghosts, and aliens, right? And you really think people who read it will think that this stuff actually happened to your family?" "I'm not talking about these details. If you read this, you'd assume we and Kakio got

into fights now and then.” “People who know you wouldn’t think that at all though.” “But people who don’t know us are also gonna read it.” “Novels are just novels. The only people who imagine that things written in one actually happened are the people who know beforehand that that novel is based on real events. When nobody says those events actually took place, everyone reads novels for what they are. Isn’t that normal? I mean, they’re just novels. And to begin with, nobody’s gonna take a novel with aliens and magics and stuff seriously.” “You never know.” “I do. You’re too paranoid. If anyone ever gets the wrong idea about you guys from reading it, I’ll pay them a visit myself and explain everything.” “No fucking thanks. Anyway, don’t go writing actual people in your novel.” “The fuck are you saying? I’m telling you I didn’t put you in my novel.” “And then you say you wrote it all while smiling, maybe you shouldn’t fuck around so much? How about taking your work seriously for once?” “Huh? Listen. I’ll tell you this ’cause it sounds like you don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about: you don’t magically become serious by writing with a serious expression.” “You can’t call your stuff serious when you keep writing about aliens and magic.” “The fuck are you saying, don’t make calls like that with your half-backed imagination when you don’t know shit, idiot. Don’t put me in the same basket as the people who actually believe in aliens and magic and whatnot. Writing aliens and magic in is kinda like using metaphors. The stuff these aliens and magic *represent* is what matters.” “And what does that puerile, child-deceiving stuff represent exactly?” “Something childish.” “...?” “Stuff like the feeling of ‘Oh this doesn’t exist but it would be nice if it did’ or ‘Wouldn’t it be awful if this existed’ you have before giving up on those because they’re unrealistic. I’m putting a world where people think that way inside my stories. Well, that’s just one example though.” “The fuck are you talking about? What does that have to do with you using Kakio and us inside your novel?” “Huh? Nothing?! I was just telling you that ’cause you keep shitting on my novels by saying I write random bullshit in them. Also *you’re* the one who set all that stuff about Kakio’s name aside. Anyway, you’re worrying for nothing. Nobody’s gonna

read that book and think the stuff that happens inside actually happened.” “I don’t care about that anymore, can’t you just stop selling it? It’s fucking annoying.” “The fuck are you saying? What do you think gives you that right when you’ve got nothing to do with it?” “Not nothing. You had us on your mind when writing it, didn’t you?” “...That, I did. But I was really only thinking about Kakio, you guys’ characters only existed to make her more like Kakio. Kakinoki Kyouka didn’t necessarily need to have two little brothers. She could have had three, or four, or even a hundred. Actually yeah, it might have been more interesting to have a hundred... Anyway, their personalities and what happens to them has nothing to do with you guys, right?” “Even if you and I know that none of that is real, other people might think otherwise.” “And these same people might also think a weird fratricide took place in your family, won’t they? It’s not like you wonder if stuff you read in other novels actually happened to that author, do you? It’s another story if they claim to be I-novels, but my books are clearly for entertainment.” “I’ve never read other people’s novels so I don’t know that crap.” “...In that case, lemme tell you. Nobody reads a novel written for entertainment and thinks that stuff actually happened. Just chill.” “But some people on the internet say your books feel like I-novels, right?” “And these people don’t know shit about me. They just feel some kind of realism from my writing and try to fit my stuff into their own definition of an I-novel. *Actual* I-novels assume that the readers are aware that the stuff depicted happened to its author. My stories aren’t like that at all. When people say my books are ‘like I-novels,’ what they mean is that, to them, my novels feel real enough to make them think that the stuff inside actually happened in reality.” “See, so people who read your book will then think that the stuff you wrote actually happened. I don’t want that.” “That’s not what I’m saying. The ‘like an I-novel’ part is about the realism in the descriptions, for example. It’s about the verisimilitude in the details.” “The what?” “Mhm? Oh, looking real.” “Your descriptions never go into that much detail though?” “In my case, either they’re reading too much into it, or they found an aspect or the general atmosphere reminiscent of another I-

novel they've read." "So people like that who read too much into your novel will think that stuff is real, won't they?" "Again, they won't. They're just talking about the writing style when they say it seems real." "And doesn't saying something seems real mean they think it might be real, huh?" "I'm telling you it doesn't, fuck off." "Now you're mad at me when you're the one who used my sister's name?" "I'm not mad, chill. I'm just saying, if someone were to read that book and come out thinking that you siblings actually met aliens and used magic and shit and killed each other, would you have a problem with it? You'd just tell them 'Take your pills, bucko' and that's it." "I don't want anyone thinking that for even a second. I hate the idea of people taking these lies for the truth. That's why your book is so annoying. Drop the bullshit explanations and do something about it." "What do you expect me to do? You better not fucking tell me to add a note saying 'This is a work of fiction and any resemblance to actual events is coincidental' in every single thing I write." "I'm telling you, I want you to stop selling that book." "Huh? Come down to earth. Where's the issue with me publishing it when I didn't write shit about you personally." "Other people might get the wrong idea." "And I keep fucking telling you they won't." "You never know that." "You're the only one who doesn't, nobody would think that." "Argh, Kakio just had to date a writer huh, it's so fucking annoying..."

Of course it was all my fault. I shouldn't have named a character a variant on Kakio's name. I shouldn't have placed that character in a novel of this type. I shouldn't have given her two little brothers. I shouldn't have made them kill each other. What Shouta actually wants to know is the reason why I treated Kakio, as well as him and Yoshinobu whom I'm relatively close to, like that. Why I made my dead girlfriend and her little brothers kill each other, albeit in a fictional story. I was careless. I was convinced for no reason that Shouta and Yoshinobu would forgive me. I thought I could justify anything for my novel. That was pure arrogance. Utter foolishness. His present anger proves that I'd failed to predict his feelings. In fact, I might have barely considered Shouta's feelings.

I'm stressing this: the story of *Kakinoki Kyouka's Farewell New World* really has absolutely nothing to do with Kakio, Shouta, or Yoshinobu. It's my attempt at defining fate in the context of a character, what it means for a character to overcome that fate, and what lies beyond that overcoming. That's the theme I pursued, and this novel is the result of *my* labor using *my* own techniques. I was interested in how people would interpret it. That's why I let my emotions get the better of me when my point of interest got denied by an issue wholly unrelated to the original theme, and to add insult to injury, I even had to hear my relationship with the girl I loved being called 'annoying,' which made me finally explode. I should've apologized for using that name without authorization from the very beginning. Withdrawing the novel from bookstores would have still been impossible, but I could've said I would ask my editor at that publisher to change the name when it would get a reprint in pocketbook format.

"Fuck off you little shit. Where the fuck were you when they cut off your sister's leg, huh? You were so scared you couldn't even get close to the hospital. Meanwhile, anticancer drugs were making your sister throw up over and over and over in pain and cry so much she couldn't even speak. And when she finally gave up on her treatment, all you could do was make lame fucking jokes to avert your eyes from it. When y'all were looking away outside the hospital, *I'm* the one who stayed with Kakio, Shithead. It was obviously painful to see her suffer, but at least *I* was happy to be able to spend some time with her. At least *I* tried to make the most out of the little time we had left together."

"So what, that means you can slander us in your novels now? When the fuck did you get that right?"

"I never wrote about you guys, for fuck's sake. I just borrowed that one name. It could have been anything else, it's just a fucking name."

"Also, you clinging to Kakio, are you sure that wasn't just to get material for your books? Weren't you pretending to sympathize and actually stayed with her just to mine ideas, huh?"

He said that to sadden me. To frustrate me, to make me angry. It's not like Shouta actually questioned my motivation. If he was, we wouldn't have stayed in contact even after Kakio passed away.

But my mind was a mess by that point, so I fell into his trap and got saddened, frustrated, and mad. My blood curdles from anger. As I stayed silent, Shouta kept going,

"Yeah actually, you spent your whole time in that hospital room working. Writing your damn books. You might've been in the same room, but weren't you also running away from her illness into the world of fiction? You're no different from us. Or do you wanna argue that's not the case and admit you had it easy mining ideas off her? Oh right, girls keep dying in your stories, don't they? How many times are you gonna kill my sister before you fuck off?"

I thought my heart would burst. Was it anger? Sadness? Frustration? Or did I panic hard because he saw right through me? Of course not. I was really just enraged. I was sad, frustrated, and angry because my feelings towards Kakio, towards my writing, and towards Shouta were being trampled.

I don't want anyone to question my feelings for Kakio!

I hung up. Shouta didn't call again. I got a message about ten minutes later saying 'I won't contact you again so don't call us or send messages either.' Half a day later, I got another message from Yoshinobu saying 'I don't really get it but I won't message you for a while.'

I don't care, I thought to myself. But needless to say, I was sad. I loved both Shouta and Yoshinobu. So naturally I ended up regretting, grieving, and feeling ashamed of my mistake. It was all my fault from the very beginning.

Since then, I've been thinking about what Shouta told me.

I kept writing next to Kakio. The doctors found her to have osteosarcoma when I was about halfway through writing the sixth entry in the *Lariat Point* series, they detected the spread to the lymph nodes right before I finished the eighth entry, and Kakio passed away shortly after I finished the ninth entry. Since I also wrote short stories between those four books, it totals to roughly

1,500 paperback pages in a full year. There are a bunch of authors who write that much. But it's about twice what I had written the year before or the year even before that. Despite my presence, Kakio broke in tears when making the call to cut off her own leg and felt so distraught she'd lash out on me and the people around her after learning that osteosarcoma has a high lethality rate and nearly lost all hope when they found the spread and lost her hair and most muscles and vomited over and over and over and over and over and over from the anticancer drug and suffered and suffered and suffered some more and sobbed and wailed so hard when it spread all the way to her spine she had to constantly be shot with narcotics but even those eventually stopped working and she went back to crying and crying...and I didn't want to see that but felt it was my duty as her boyfriend to stay so I cloistered myself in that hospital room with nowhere to hide except from inside my head, in my fiction, in my books?

But, no, that just can't be. I was *right next* to Kakio. It's not like she muted her voice to cry. Her cries resembled screams of agony. It's not like she was silently writing all her complaints and annoyances and grudges in a notebook. It's not like she was posting about her overwhelming fear and sadness on the BBS feed of some random website. She told me pretty much everything. I'm the one who held her cold hand when she lamented the loss of her right leg; I'm the one who patted her back at night when she would cry; and I'm the one who would call her name at half past five in the morning when a hollowness I'd never seen before and can only describe as a hole in space loomed in Kakio's eyes. I didn't do those things because I'm her boyfriend. I held her hand and patted her back and called her name solely because I wanted to touch her and appease her sadness and suffering and anguish by taking some of it on my shoulders. I couldn't care less about how others saw me. Actually, in the latter half, Kakio's parents weren't happy with me always being by her side. They made a fuss about how sad and regretful it was that Kakio would die and leave me alone. Her father even asked me once not to come to the hospital for a while. However, I knew that request would only help bring

peace to *their* minds and refused. They only wanted their daughter to be quiet. They wanted her to pipe down and stay still because the opposite took a toll on their minds. At some point I wondered if Kakio would have gone quiet as they expected if it wasn't for me, but I just couldn't picture it happening. When I left in the morning for a meeting with my editor and only made it back to the hospital at five PM, Kakio called me a traitor, a coward, a wimp, and many things in tears, then proceeded to not let go of my hand for 20 hours straight. Who cares if her parents suffered a bit. Who cares if the doctors and nurses were mildly inconvenienced. At least everyone was still alive. If she was in a shared room I would have felt bad for the other cancer patients around us, but Kakio had her own room. What's wrong with saying it hurts when it hurts, crying when you're sad, wailing when in pain, talking about your worries, and filling the rest of the time with complaints and grumbles.

Still, was I looking at Kakio's suffering as a source of ideas for my novels?

When I was in her hospital room, did I never feel like this experience would eventually turn into a pretty good book?

I recall:

"I'm sorry, Osamu," Kakio said. That was a fair while after all hope was basically lost, when even the commotion in her family was starting to show signs of waning. When, despite thinking I had long calmed down and mostly accepted the situation, I suddenly broke into tears.

"I'm sorry to inflict this on you. I didn't want to make you this miserable," she said. She'd already told me the same thing on multiple occasions, but never what came next.

"You wouldn't have gone through all these emotions if we hadn't met. I'm so sorry."

I got angry while still in tears.

"Why? And what, I would have been happy with someone else? I would've been happier with them, is that it? You're saying I would've been happier never meeting you or knowing about you?"

"Mhn, I didn't really..."

“You know, sure, I might be sad right now, but I’m not *only* sad, okay? I *am* sad, but even then I’m still glad we were able to share this love...if you don’t mind me calling it that. I really am. It’s very sad and painful, yes, but I’m genuinely happy I can share this moment, however brief, with you—and I’m sure a part of me is even having fun. I mean, no matter how sad and painful it gets, I’m never sick of it. I’m never tempted to go do something fun elsewhere.”

“Of course you can call it love.”

“Huh?”

“This. Our relationship. What else would you call it if not love? If this isn’t it, I can’t tell you what would be.”

“Yeah...” Right. I had stopped doubting this ages ago. I’d forgotten that. But that’s something I shouldn’t forget. This isn’t pity or dependence.

“I really love you, Kakio”, I said. “From the bottom of my heart.”

“I also loved you, Osamu,” Kakio said, and the both of us instantly realized she had used the past tense. That realization fell upon us like lightning.

I wanted to casually retort “Come on, why the past tense?” However, saying something of the sort in this situation casually was beyond me. I couldn’t make out a single word. Kakio didn’t correct herself either. That’s normal too. In a figurative sense, her words weren’t mistaken at all. Our ‘love’ already belonged to the past.

Needless to say, that doesn’t mean Kakio had stopped loving me. Our love becoming an artifact of the past was a result of Kakio herself belonging to the past.

We both learned then that this is how death starts.

It felt like the nature of death I had spent so much time pondering on, fantasizing about, and struggling with, had abruptly become self-evident. People don’t die when their hearts stop or when their brains cease functioning. Death starts and ends way more gently than one thinks. In a way, Kakio was already dead as she existed in front of me. I don’t know when that gentle, mellow, yet fateful death had begun inside Kakio. However, it had spawned

inside her a long time ago and slowly grown bigger and bigger since by eating up her life. And at this moment, death was outdoing life. Kakio had succumbed after constantly fighting it off. That loss must have happened a long time ago, unbeknownst to Kakio herself. She probably imagined she was still fighting it off. Kakio was already dead. Despite a functioning heart and brain, she'd let death swallow her whole. Kakio had given up on herself, on life.

But! My beloved Kakio is strong!

"Not loved. I still love you. And I will keep loving you for eternity to come," she fought back. She used all her might to retrieve her life, to return among the living!

"I also love you, Kakio," I said once more. "I'll keep loving you forever. Prepare yourself, we have a hundred more years to spend together."

"Hahaha, not that long please," Kakio laughed. "They'd put me on the TV if I lived up to 124."

"What's the big deal, it's just the TV."

We imagined our wrinkled, saggy faces side by side putting up a big smile in front of a TV camera and chuckled.

"Also, I'd be the eldest. 126, huh. I'd probably be ready to pass on by that point."

"I would then follow right after so we can slowly enjoy the afterlife together."

"Of course."

"It's a promise."

"Bet."

I touched Kakio's fragile neck.

I knew this promise would eventually turn into a memory.

How long do memories last?

That has always been the core matter to me ever since Kakio got hospitalized:

How long will we be able to remember each other for?

Our memories, I think some more and correct myself. It's not 'we.' How long will *I* be able to remember Kakio for—that's more accurate. I'm the only one who can conserve our memories.

A thought emerges within me as I let that fact sink in. I want to transcribe that tangible sensation I'd experienced regarding the nature of death into a novel. That powerful moment when she shook away death as it temporarily seemed to have overtaken her; the fact we were able to see ourselves together a hundred years in the future despite knowing it was all talk; these are the kinds of things I wanted to document.

How about this? Yes, I wanted to put those things in my stories. However, it's not like I'm planning on writing the facts as they happened like in a journal. If I were to, it wouldn't be a novel. I don't write things that actually happened. I only write things that could have happened but didn't, or things that didn't happen because they couldn't have. Writing those, I try to express things that actually happened or the points I want to make, even partially—rather, I pray that I'm managing that. Therefore, Shouta is indeed wrong. The things I saw are what I don't write. I won't write Kakio's death the way it actually happened.

That being said, it wouldn't be honest to say I haven't written about her death at all. Actually, I have put down on paper that Kakio has died. I've dismantled that fact and included parts of it in diverse ways in various works of mine. For example, in my short story *Light*, I've depicted how, within the extension of everyday life plagued with non-important things, boring jokes, and stupid mistakes, death can be abrupt, and also the opposite in that you can still keep a smile and laugh at non-important things, boring jokes, and stupid mistakes within the extension of everyday life while death waits ahead; and while I'd experienced that before Kakio's death—she didn't spend all hours of the day sullen, sobbing, or throwing a fit—what I truly wanted to write about in *Light* was what *didn't* happen to Kakio. I wanted to convey that, even if it might kill someone at times, light is still beautiful and warm and

makes our feelings come together. While the flash of a bomb, the conflagration of a house burning down, and the eruption of a volcano all harbor inherent danger, they have light, and that light being undeniably pretty, fascinating to us, and urging us to admire it however many times, in sum, means that beauty doesn't base itself off ethics; however, critique is based on ethics—that's what I wanted to show the reader. When you find the flame enveloping someone being burnt alive both beautiful and not beautiful, you are right to find it beautiful and you are right to not find it beautiful.

Like that, I have penned Kakio's death in various ways. I've written about many aspects of it in all kinds of places. But I'm not doing that for the sake of doing it. It's here to enable me to talk about the memories and feelings of a different me, of a me wholly unrelated to Kakio's death.

In a way, you could say that Kakio's death has become an instrument to that end. However, that doesn't mean I'm *using* her death; when I accepted the fact that Kakio died in pain and agony still wishing she wouldn't die, as well as the grief and bitterness that ensued, as something that happened to me and a part of my life—although I'm still sad and bitter to this day—it also meant that got incorporated in my everyday as something that has happened to me. Death exists in people's lives. It can even take the form of a lover's death. No one is safe from that. But when writing about it, I'm not interested in how sad and frustrating it can be; what I want to explore is what lies beyond or alongside that grief and frustration.

What I want to write about is what existed next or beyond what actually happened.

However, even if I don't use things that actually happened for my themes, I employ them as motifs—as I've done with Kakio's death—which still begs the question: Did I stay by Kakio's side to obtain those?

That's wrong too. When writing my fiction, I use all kinds of things that happened in my life, not the 'special' things. I don't live my life to write novels; I live a life where I write novels. Kakio's death didn't cause me to be alive, and likewise, I don't write novels because Kakio died. Of course, Kakio's death

and the first bite of bread I took yesterday don't fascinate me in the same ways. But objectively-speaking, they are equally important. The information I've gained from the freshly-toasted bread onto which I'd spread margarine, the warmth and softness transmitted from the crust to my fingers, the bread's overall elasticity and robustness, the scents of bread and margarine blending in the steam, and the luster of the melting margarine; and the information I've gained from Kakio's death weigh the same. All aspects and events of every single moment of my life are equally important to me, I just haven't paid enough attention to them.

The same goes for anyone.

That's why there are so many books out there. Many people write about a bunch of stuff. Not all stories are about a lover's death, a parent's death, a child's birth, or an event seemingly more life-changing than what was expected before it happened. There are books about tiny events that someone experienced at some point in their everyday life, and some about things so insignificant no one would even dare call them events. In other words, stories depend on how keenly you pay attention to things. If you are attentive enough, all matters should be equal to you, as previously stated. Raising my hand to call a taxi, sitting on emergency stairs, taking my phone out of my bag, heading to grab a bath towel, flipping through a dictionary, being served water by a waiter, assembling a chest of drawers, removing a bug from my apartment, staring at the wood grain on the ceiling, choosing the color for my new blinds, bringing a roll of filefish to my mouth, looking up the time of my flight, trying to buy lucky bamboo; every single moment of each of these things has as much meaning and importance to me as losing Kakio does.

So why was I able to write at the same pace as previously during the brief time I spent by Kakio's side? Why did I not stop writing even after learning she didn't have much longer to live? Why did I not plan on slowly coming back to writing after Kakio passed away?

The answer is simple.

It's obviously not that Kakio's impending death roused my eagerness to write in some way, nor that I was running away, nor that I wanted Kakio to see me writing, nor that I was trying to analyze Kakio's death in some deep way through my novels; it's just that I was alive and Kakio spent a lot of her time asleep or receiving treatment, so I had to fill all of that free time. It's just that I was bored with nothing to do. Also I was fairly aware I would keep on living, and I needed to keep publishing stuff if I wanted to pay the rent for my apartment in Chofu I barely used at the time, unless I wanted my belongings there gone and no place to live after Kakio passed away. I wasn't employed at a company. I wasn't working part-time either. I was writing novels and didn't really have anything else I wanted or had to do.

Kakio has asked me many times which was more important, my novels or her. She's done so both before and after contracting her illness. I hesitated whether I should say "I can't compare those" but chose to be more clear. "It's you, Kakio. Obviously."

I truly meant that. I didn't say it because I was her boyfriend. I didn't say it out of pity either. I didn't even say it out of love.

Even if the opposite might happen, love doesn't stage words.

Although you can kind of make yourself fall in love with someone by thinking "I like her" or "I might like her," when someone who loves someone else thinks to themselves they love that person, that thought is completely genuine and in no way a performance.

I also love novels. Maybe I actually can't compare them and Kakio. But I didn't want to hesitate when comparing Kakio to something else, and I didn't want to say I can't compare them either. The mere fact I didn't want to do that was enough to prove that I love Kakio much more than novels and that she's incredibly dear to me.

...Still, love and stories might actually be one and the same. Right. Love is a prayer, and so are stories. Maybe that doesn't stop at the essence, and they have more similarities in their structures. If so, then love and stories might

truly be the same thing. Sometimes we call that thing love, and other times we call it a story.

Kakio didn't go home even as her last moments grew close. "You would have a hard time being there with me, wouldn't you?" she told me. Kakio was spending all her time with me on Miura Hospital's seventh floor. Except for a certain sunny day of November when she said she wanted to go on a walk:

I start making preparations to head out when she tells me,

"Ah, Osamu, you stay here. I mean you don't really need to be *here*, you can do whatever you want."

"Nah, it's dangerous," I tell her. She's missing her left leg and doesn't have the strength to operate a wheelchair. On her own, she wouldn't even be able to stand with crutches.

"I'll be fine, I made arrangements so someone would come pick me up."

"Who?"

"A secret. Hahahah."

I go silent.

"Yup, I'll keep my destination and anything I do today a secret from you, Osamu."

"...Why?"

"I mean, you see everything I do right now and that's so booooring. So I'll go make some secrets. Upset?"

"Not really," I say. I'm just confused at how sudden this is. I'm still not sure how to feel about it. My mind hasn't processed it yet. "I dunno."

"Heh heh. I won't explain a thing about today, okay? Even after I come back, I'm not telling you anything."

"..."

"Worried?"

"Yeah? Of course."

"Think I'm going to cheat on you?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

“...”

“I might, you know~. I don’t have much time left, why do you think I wouldn’t go meet up with someone I like or am interested in?”

“...”

“Hahahah, didn’t know you could look that dejected after all we’ve been through. So you still get vexed and jealous, eh...”

“Shut up.”

“We’re such a lovey-dovey pair, aren’t we. Love is pretty insane, actually. Even with the other person on the brink of death, love doesn’t care, it’ll be as selfish as it wants.”

“What are you on about?”

“Well, you see, I really, truly, super love you, Osamu. With all of my being. But that’s also why I don’t want you to know *everything* about me. It just doesn’t sit well with me. So today I’m going to act in secrecy to remedy that.”

“I’m not sure I get it, but don’t do anything dangerous, okay? Seriously, I’m super worried.”

“Nay! Worry more. Making you worry is also part of why I’m keeping to-day a secret, after all.”

“I already do that a ton every day.”

“Still not enough.”

“So you’re actually heading out?”

“Yup. You can relax here. Just don’t follow me.”

“What’s the point?”

“Are you listening? To make secrets.”

“No but like, what’s the point of that?”

“Beats me.”

“...What? C’mon, be reasonable.”

“Nope. Can you help me change?”

She maintains a bright expression as I undo her pajamas. When it comes time to put on a bra, she gets excited at how long it’s been since she last wore

one. She's been wearing sweatshirts exclusively since September and was initially pumped about not having to wear bras anymore. I help her put on a jersey dress shirt and a cardigan, then stockings from which I cut off the extraneous part on her right leg, and finally a skirt.

When it comes time for the coat, she looks at my somber face and says,

"Look sad all you want, I'm not changing my mind. I'll achieve my plans for today no matter what it takes."

"I'm not making that face to plead to you or anything."

"Then put on a more pleasant expression so I can leave feeling better. Go on, say cheese."

"...Cheese my ass," I sigh.

"Hahahah. Welp, keep worrying then. I *really* won't explain anything later on, okay?"

"Yeah, whatever."

I then call a nurse so we can put her on a wheelchair. "Oh, Kakio, going on a date today? The weather's nice after all," she says upon entering, to which Kakio only replies "It sure is."

Kakio leaves the wheelchair in my care after I put her in a taxi, and says, "I'm off."

"Have a nice day," I reply. I do my best to put on a smile. She sees that and makes a few tiny nods. "When will you be back, roughly?" I remember that I hadn't asked that.

"No idea. I might call you then."

"Okay. Please be careful. Call me at the slightest thing. I'll be at the hospital."

"You can go do whatever you want, Osamu. Later!" she says as the taxi door closes before leaving Miura Hospital's premises. It's still a quarter past nine and I don't have anything special to do.

I put some order in Kakio's hospital room on the seventh floor. I do the laundry. I clean up. I wash the mugs. I watch videos. Even after that, it's only just noon. I eat lunch. I watch more videos while snacking. I wash the mugs

again. I can't get motivated to write. I don't have any deadlines coming up soon. I spread out my manuscript paper. I can't think of anything. I decide to change things up, leave the hospital with my laptop, boot it up in a coffee shop, and stare at the screen. A beginning comes to mind. "Rumors have it that Norway Pumpkin, known for keeping snakes in his right arm and having precognition powers, was born under bombings during the war where he got equipped with a gas mask right after being birthed, then got put into a bag along with a gas cylinder which later got inserted inside a zoo elephant's anus, said elephant traveling all the way from Osaka to Hyogo after escaping from its cage and running out of strength there, but Pumpkin survived." But I can't think of more. After my second cup of coffee, I give this beginning the title *Norway Pumpkin's Certain Tomorrow*, then shut down the system, fold my laptop, and return to the hospital. It's still half past four. I lie down on Kakio's bed. It smells like her. The pillow is ever so slightly damp. I want to dry it but the sun is already coming down. I put on the TV. I go to the toilet. I don't belong anywhere without Kakio. I don't have a *raison d'être* without Kakio.

I start wondering where she is. Who she's meeting. What she's doing.

I can't think of anyone she'd want to meet and feel the need to keep it a secret from me. She has three exes but they're not in contact with her anymore and I'm not sure she'd want to see them now. She didn't let any sign of it, but who knows. From her personality, I can't imagine she would meet up with an ex in secret, but I also can't imagine she would head somewhere on her own like today... Kakio said I know everything there is to know about her, but that's not the case at all. I can't even guess what she's doing right now.

Maybe she's preparing something for me. I could see her doing that, yeah. She might be out to buy me a present and surprise me later. She seems happy that I'm always with her, so it's not unthinkable she would want to send the favor back...

Seven o'clock comes around, then eight and the cafeteria closes for the day, but Kakio is still not back.

I'm lying down on her bed. A nurse comes in and remarks "My, Kakio is still not back?" before leaving. "Woah, you look so bored, Mr. Andou," the patient from the room next over, Mrs. Takami, says after taking a peek.

At nine o'clock I start getting angry.

At ten o'clock I start getting worried.

I lose sight of whether I'm mad, worried, sad, bored, or something else.

Kakio comes back at half past ten. I'm still lying on her bed. I don't notice her coming in. She leans forward in her wheelchair and kisses me.

"I'm back."

"Welcome home."

I stare at her face. I'm probably making a mixed expression. Kakio is wearing a peaceful smile. I can tell she's tired. "Oh sorry, gimme a second," I say, making to leave the bed, but Kakio pushes down on my shoulders and reassures me,

"It's fine, really, stay like that, sleep on."

"Aren't you tired though?"

"And so are you, right? It's okay. Sleep some more. I want to tend to you for once."

"Mhm."

I lie down again. Kakio hasn't brought anything back. She doesn't seem any different. Just tired. I can't discern traces of fun, sadness, joy, lifelessness, or anything.

"How was it?" I go on a limb and ask.

Apparently this question doesn't cross the line.

"It was fun," she replies. "On your side?"

"Just boredom."

"Managed to relax?"

"With the worrying and all, I don't think I ever really did."

"You were sleeping like a rock on my bed, though?"

"I just got tired out from worrying."

"Glad you got to sleep, then."

“Meh. You’re not gonna tell me about what happened today?”

“Nope. I warned you.”

“Will you tell me one day?”

“I *won’t*. Ever.”

She really never told me. That long, boring day...that lonely and irritating and upsetting and awful day—it’s still continuing inside me even now.

That urge to know where Kakio went is still living inside me.

I might actually be wondering where she is now, or I might really still be trying to figure out where she went, or I might simply be wishing to know more about Kakio, whether it has to do with her destination of that day or not.

I imagine all sorts of things about that day. I’ve piled up many fantasies and will keep doing so.

All those fantasies are stories I won’t turn into novels, and the embodiment of my yearning for Kakio. I hypothesize about where she was. I make up a story about what happened. I feel an urge to go there myself. All of those stories and all of those urges are reflections of my love.

I think a lot about Kakio and that day. Doing so, I eventually start wondering if Kakio headed out without telling me anything for that exact purpose; so I would keep thinking about it, so I would keep thinking about Kakio even after she passes away. If thinking about it is equivalent to expressing my love for Kakio, I might have fallen into her trap by doing that over and over, again and again, without ever forgetting my feelings for her.

Quite a while has passed now since Kakio left me, and I’m still looking for her. I’m still in love with her. I’m still putting stories together.

My friends and the people around me recommend I move on and try looking for someone else, saying I should stop living in the past and start looking at the future, but Kakio and I still love each other. Of course I might fall in love with another girl. My feelings for Kakio are mere memories by now. However, I’ve fallen into her trap and am still tangled in stories about her. Her secret activities on that day. And that’s not everything. Memories grow fuzzy as time passes, and they eventually become no different from fantasies. They

become stories. Those things I have experienced with her are slowly turning into stories. Stories of love. Naturally.

And since all of those are the product of Kakio's love, I end up wanting to reciprocate it. It will still take more time for me to get out of this.

That being said, I sometimes tell myself I shouldn't stay bound to a girl who's no longer alive, even if I've sworn to. Especially when it was a promise I made fully intending on breaking it. Right. I can betray Kakio whenever I want.

But I don't. Not yet.

I love Kakio more than I need to. I love her enough for it to be a mistake. I think it's okay to ruin my life for that love, like an idiot. And that's fine.

As Pascal said:

When one does not love too much, one does not love enough.

I'm writing novels by myself. I sometimes turn women down. I know I'm being stupid.

But I'm okay with being stupid. I'm okay with piling up mistakes.

That's what loving too much is about. And that's about the right intensity for one's love to be.